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SF PERUSALS

The Quality of Life

by Jane Anderson

A Samuel French Acting Edition



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THE QUALITY OF LIFE was first produced by the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles on October 10, 2007. The performance was directed by Jane Anderson, with sets by Francois-Pierre Couture, costumes by Christina Haatainen Jones, lighting by Jason Thompson, sound design by Karl Lundeberg, and properties by Ilana Gordon. The production stage manager was Anna Belle Gilbert. The cast was as follows:

DINAH. . . . . JoBeth Williams
BILL. . . . . Scott Bakula
JEANETTE. . . . . .Laurie Metcalf
NEIL. . . . . Dennis Boutsikaris

CHARACTERS

DINAH & BILL, who live in Ohio.
JEANNETTE & NEIL, their cousins on the west coast.

SETTING

Ohio & the Berkeley Hills in Northern California.

TIME

The present, approximately.

ACT I

SCENE ONE

(Lights up on a middle-aged couple, **DINAH** *and* **BILL***, sitting in two chairs. He's a stoic, farm-bred man, a contractor by trade. She's a housewife with a comfortable figure and a kind, anxious face. He's reading his paper. She's knitting – a bit obsessively.)*

DINAH. I got a call today from my cousin Jeannette. I finally sent her a note about Cindy. She was so very sorry and sends us all her love.

BILL. Uh-huh.

DINAH. We had a long, long talk. She and her husband are going through their own tragedy right now. You know that big fire out in California a few months ago?

BILL. No, I don't remember.

DINAH. Yes you do. Remember I had said to you, "Oh, I wonder if Jeannette and Neil were affected."

BILL. No.

DINAH. Honey, we had a fight about it. You started going on about how people shouldn't live next to uncleared brush and then you went on about earthquakes and what fools the people in San Francisco were to build on landfill and I got mad at you and said you were being a crank and you said don't be such a bleeding heart and I wouldn't talk to you for the rest of the night – you don't remember that?

BILL. No.

DINAH. Anyway, their house burned down. It's gone. All gone. Burned down to the chimney.

BILL. It doesn't compare. They can rebuild. Don't compare it to what we're going through.

DINAH. I'm not comparing, Bill, my heart's going out to them, that's all. And if you'd let me finish – it gets worse. Neil has cancer. It started in his prostate and apparently has spread all through his body. It doesn't look good for him.

BILL. It still doesn't compare.

DINAH. You don't have to compare, it's not a contest for sweet sake. I'm just asking you to listen to the story. Just let me talk, allow me to tell you about a conversation that I had.

BILL. Go on, then.

DINAH. We talked about us going out there for a visit.

BILL. What on earth for?

DINAH. They're family. Jeannette and I talked about how crazy it was that all these years we never made the effort to see each other – that it shouldn't just be funerals that bring us back together, that just because our parents are gone that doesn't mean we shouldn't stay in touch. And we talked about the fact that she never knew Cindy as the beautiful young woman that she was –

(She stops. **BILL** *waits.)*

I'd like to see them.

BILL. I can't take off work.

DINAH. Well, we can fly out on a Friday night, and come home on a Sunday.

BILL. Why don't you just go on your own?

DINAH. I don't want to travel alone. Not yet. I just can't. Please, would you do this for me.

BILL. If we go, we're not going to stay with them.

DINAH. Honey, of course we're not, they don't even have a house. They're apparently living in a yurt.

BILL. In a what?

DINAH. A yurt. It's a Mongolian tent kind of thing.

BILL. Aw for gosh sakes.

DINAH. Please, Bill. I think it'll be good for us. It'll be good for us to get away.

BILL. Let me think about it.

*(***DINAH** *is hit with another wave of grief and quietly starts to cry.* **BILL** *pulls out his hankie and hands it to her.)*

DINAH. Sorry, Honey, I'm almost done.

BILL. Do what you have to do.

(beat)

I think I'll go mow the lawn.

Scene Two

(Reveal of the burn site of Jeannette and Neil's former home in the Berkeley Hills. The devastation is breathtaking. But an effort has been put into making the site not only liveable, but aggressively cheerful. Blackened skeletons of trees are hung with prayer flags, wind chimes and relics of the fire in the form of bits of household objects and glass that melted together in the conflagration. The scorched trunk of one of the trees has been turned into an improvised shrine to the fire, covered with a collection of totems and photos and blessings and esoteric objects placed there by well-meaning friends.)

(A yurt has been set up where the house once stood. There's an outdoor kitchen with a sink, a small fridge and a propane stove. Extension cords are running to a box hooked up to a solar panel. There's a sitting area with a rough bench cut from a salvaged tree and a couple of lawn chairs.)

*(***JEANNETTE** *and* **NEIL** *enter, leading* **DINAH** *and* **BILL** *who've just arrived.* **JEANNETTE** *is the same age as her cousin, but she dresses in a vaguely eccentric fashion, reflecting the earthy, intellectual culture of post-hippy Northern California. She's a rebellious, energetic soul and looks especially vital next to* **NEIL** *who's physically depleted. His spirits are fully intact, however. He and* **JEANNETTE** *are giving* **DINAH** *and* **BILL** *a tour of the site with enormous good cheer.)*

(Note: Both hosts and guests are doing their best to stay upbeat. Play it fast and jolly. No sorrowful pauses, please.)

NEIL. …The fire started way down there in the canyon, do you see where that road ends?

BILL. Uh huh –

NEIL. It started right over there and once it got going, it only took five, maybe six minutes to make its way up here.

DINAH. Oh my gosh –

JEANNETTE. It was just incredible. Very end of the world.

DINAH. Oh, I'm sure.

NEIL. And what's interesting is that now that the undergrowth is gone you can really study the terrain. You can see how the gorge acted like a natural chimney and how it led straight up to the house.

JEANETTE. WHOOSH!

DINAH. Oh dear.

*(***JEANNETTE** *laughs.)*

BILL. You never thought to clear out any of that brush?

NEIL. You mean all one hundred fifty acres of the canyon?

BILL. Well, or thinned it out around your house.

NEIL. We did some clearing. But we didn't want to completely strip the land, turn it into a parking lot.

JEANNETTE. And we loved our trees. That's why we bought the place.

DINAH. Oh I can understand that.

JEANNETTE. It's the chance you take.

DINAH. Of course.

BILL. Was it arson?

NEIL. No, a couple of kids were camping. They thought they had completely stamped out their fire but there were still some embers left in the duff.

BILL. Were they pressed on charges?

NEIL. No, it wasn't deliberate. Christ, the poor boys felt awful enough.

DINAH. Where were you when the fire started, were you both home?

NEIL. Jeannette was taking a shower. I was on the deck – getting some air…

JEANNETTE. Neil was right in the middle of chemo.

NEIL. I was dealing with the nausea.

DINAH. Oh my gosh, that on top of everything else!

JEANNETTE. *(laughs)* Incredible, isn't it?

NEIL. I saw some smoke down in the canyon so I went in the house to call 911 – they put me on hold, of course.

BILL. That's what they do.

JEANNETTE. It was outrageous. They had him on hold for ten minutes.

NEIL. So by the time I got back out here, this thing has developed into a full-out fire storm. It was coming up the hill so fast, I could feel this bounce of air, like the shock wave off a bomb.

BILL. Sure, fire makes its own wind.

NEIL. We had some wind chimes right over there and they all started ringing at once – made a beautiful sound.

JEANNETTE. And in the meantime, I have no idea what's going on. I'm just getting out of the shower, and I'm noticing this eerie light coming through the bathroom window – it's orange and muted, like it's already dusk. And I'm thinking, shit, what time is it? I know I'm into long showers, but this is ridiculous.

DINAH. Oh dear.

JEANNETTE. And then I smell the smoke and it finally registers with me that the entire canyon is on fire – thank you, hello, earth-to-Jeannette…

DINAH. Oh my gosh.

BILL. Oh boy.

JEANNETTE. So I run out on the deck and I see my honey here standing in his bare feet with a goddamn garden hose trying to head off a forty foot wall of flame!

NEIL. I was trying to wet down the deck.

JEANNETTE. You were in your own world, Babe.

(to **BILL** *and* **DINAH***)*

It was incredible. Fire brands were raining down on his poor bald head, the deck is starting to smoke and all you could hear is this hellacious crackling – I don't know how he could've heard the wind chimes, the fire was so fucking loud.

NEIL. Selective hearing.

JEANNETTE. That's your gift, Babe. So anyway, I scream at him to get in the car and we both run into the house – now I'm buck naked and I'm throwing on clothes, Neil is looking for his wallet, we're both trying to find the cat.

NEIL. She'd been out on the deck with me but she ran off.

DINAH. Oh no.

JEANNETTE. Our sweet kitty. Neil is looking all over for her, screaming out her name. And I'm running around our house which is packed, I mean it is packed with twenty years of stuff – and I'm thinking, "What do I take, what do I take?"

DINAH. I can't imagine.

JEANNETTE. And I run to our office. I stood there staring at what's basically a room full of kindling – all of Neil's notes and research papers and manuscripts, my poems and journals, photographs – stacks of them, just scattered around in ten different piles. Our entire creative output is all about to be torched, right? All I could do is grab Neil's reading glasses and my favorite pen. A pen and a pair of glasses, what is that about?

DINAH. Well, who can think clearly in a situation like that?

BILL. You should have taken your computers, that's what I would have done. You had everything backed up on them, right?

JEANNETTE. Forget it, there was no way I was going to drag those suckers out. They weighed about thirty pounds a piece.

NEIL. We're not big on upgrading.

JEANNETTE. Bad for the landfill.

DINAH. Sure.

JEANNETTE. But they ended up getting incinerated anyway, sending God knows what kind of poisonous crap into the air. So there you go.

*(***NEIL** *points to a scorched circuit board hanging from one of the trees.)*

NEIL. That's my computer right there. Makes a good bird perch, don't you think?

(They all gaze up at the various remnants dangling from the blackened limbs.)

DINAH. Are all of these things from the fire?

NEIL. We went treasure hunting in the ash. *(pointing)* That's what's left of our silverware…that's my Nikon… That's Jeannette's tea pot –

JEANNETTE. I like how it got re-glazed in the fire.

DINAH. Oh, interesting.

*(***NEIL** *points to a globular mass of glass with different colors running through it.)*

NEIL. That's our favorite, right there.

JEANNETTE. We love how the light shines through it. It's like a stained-glass window.

DINAH. That is kind of beautiful. What is that?

JEANNETTE. Bottles from the recycling bin.

DINAH. Oh, neat. And what are all those silver dribbley things?

NEIL. Window frames.

JEANNETTE. We found those all over the place. Neil said to me, "Hey look Babe, Jackson Pollack was here."

DINAH. That's cute.

(to **BILL***)*

Jackson Pollack was that artist…

BILL. Yeah, I know.

(to **NEIL***)*

What were the window frames made of, aluminum?

NEIL. Yes.

BILL. That has a pretty high melting point. How hot did the fire get?

NEIL. They say about two thousand degrees.

DINAH. Oh my gosh.

BILL. Yep, that'll do it.

DINAH. Oh, I just ache for both of you. What an awful, awful loss.

JEANNETTE. No, not really. It was all just stuff.

DINAH. Oh but still, this was your home. There must have been many things you lost that were very precious to you.

JEANNETTE. But that's our own perception, you see. As Neil has pointed out to me, we're the ones that assign preciousness to an object – individually or culturally. We can either give value to something or take it away.

DINAH. I suppose.

JEANNETTE. Neil put the whole thing in perspective for me. We had these masks – Babe, you should tell it.

NEIL. No, go ahead.

JEANNETTE. OK. We had these tribal masks that we'd been collecting for years from all over the world, from Neil's field studies. Incredible things, full of meaning, full of memories, invaluable as a research tool. And we had them up on the wall and when friends or students would come to the house, Neil would give them the five-dollar tour: "This mask is from Mali, given to us by a shaman who only had one eye but claimed that he could levitate…" Blah-blah-blah. But anyway, they were the centerpiece of our home, right?

DINAH. Sure.

JEANNETTE. We were both devastated that they were gone. I could have kicked myself for not having the presence of mind to at least grab a couple of them. I got myself into this state of guilt and blame and rage. I was furious at myself, I was furious at the kids for starting the fire –

BILL. I'd be furious too.

JEANNETTE. But anger can't change the circumstance. All it does is put more poison into your system.

DINAH. That's a very good point.

JEANNETTE. And so Neil had me re-examine the mask issue. He posed this question: are those masks essential to our survival.

DINAH. Interesting.

JEANNETTE. The answer, of course, is no. We're not shamans. We don't need the masks to chase away demons or oversee a circumcision. We can function perfectly well without them. But you know what we found out we absolutely cannot live without? A toothbrush.

NEIL. And floss.

JEANNETTE. And floss, you can't face the day without floss. But the masks – they were just something to hang on the wall, something to admire.

DINAH. They were just decoration.

JEANNETTE. Exactly.

NEIL. *(the relics)* And now we have these. Just as beautiful, just as provocative, just as useless.

DINAH. Did you ever find your cat?

NEIL. No.

JEANNETTE. We're hoping she outran the fire.

DINAH. How long has she been gone?

NEIL. Two months.

DINAH. Oh gee, she could still show up. You know, animals do that. They run away and hide then they find their way back.

NEIL. If she did get trapped, we just hope it went fast for her. Knowing her, she didn't stick around, she just let her spirit fly.

JEANNETTE. She's a wonderful, magical kitty, smart and sweet. She'd take walks with us in the morning and sit with us while we worked…it was very hard to leave without her. Very hard. She's the only thing that we miss.

DINAH. I'm so, so sorry.

BILL. You can always get another cat.

DINAH. Oh Bill.

BILL. What I meant to say is that I'm sure this cat meant a lot to you but it's not like losing a child. I've lost a lot of pets in my life so I know about that. It's sad but you get over it. You get another one and you move on. But with a child, there's no getting over that. That's all, that's what I meant to say.

JEANNETTE. Bill, no, of course, we understand.

BILL. So when are you planning to rebuild?

NEIL. We're not.

BILL. You mean you're moving on to somewhere else?

JEANNETTE. We'll see. We're very comfortable here.

DINAH. Do you have a bathroom?

JEANNETTE. Right over there. We have a very high-end outhouse.

BILL. Are you on septic or sewer?

NEIL. It's a composting toilet.

BILL. I know a builder who started using one on his site. But he had some problems with it. Are you satisfied with yours?

NEIL. Yep, so far, so good.

JEANNETTE. Works like a charm.

DINAH. And where do you bathe?

JEANNETTE. The other structure over there is our bath house. It has a shower and a big claw-foot tub. We take great soaks in there.

DINAH. Oh, I'm a bath person too. I can sit in a tub for hours.

JEANNETTE. Soothes the soul.

DINAH. It sure does for me.

BILL. I see you're on solar.

NEIL. Yep.

BILL. How much wattage do you get?

NEIL. At peak power, about fifty-four watts.

BILL. That's pretty good output for a unit like that.

NEIL. Yep.

DINAH. And this is your kitchen?

JEANNETTE. That's it. It has everything we need.

BILL. Are you going to enclose it?

JEANNETTE. No.

BILL. What happens when it rains?

JEANNETTE. Then I don't have to cook.

DINAH. Lucky you!

BILL. You know, it wouldn't take much for me to put a simple roof over this. I could have it up by the end of the day.

JEANNETTE. That's sweet of you, Hon, but you don't need to do that.

BILL. It's just a trip to the lumber yard.

DINAH. It's no trouble for Bill. He loves to build things.

JEANNETTE. It's a wonderful offer, but Neil couldn't take the hammering. He's sensitive to noise.

NEIL. I'm a little fragile right now, Bill. It's not my choice, but what can you do.

BILL. Sure.

DINAH. Of course, we understand.

(an awkward beat)

BILL. So that's the yurt. It's quite a structure..

NEIL. It was designed by Mongolian nomads. The whole thing can be rolled up and packed on your pony or your Ford Pickup or whatever you happen to be riding across the eastern steppes.

DINAH. Was this one made in Mongolia?

NEIL. Seattle.

DINAH. Oh.

BILL. How long does it take to put it up?

NEIL. Well, theoretically it should take half an hour. But it took us three days.

JEANNETTE. We combined the yurt-raising with a little post-inferno party. The tequila kind of slowed everybody down.

DINAH. Is it comfortable to sleep in?

JEANNETTE. Oh yeah, it's like a womb. Take a look inside.

DINAH. *(peeking in)* Oh hey, it does look comfortable

JEANNETTE. Check it out. Just take your shoes off.

DINAH. All right. Bill?

BILL. Sure.

*(***BILL** *and* **DINAH** *kick their shoes off and go into the yurt.)*

JEANNETTE . How're you doing?

NEIL. I need some relief.

JEANNETTE. I'll handle it. You're being very patient with them.

NEIL. I'll be a lot more patient once I'm high.

*(***BILL** *and* **DINAH** *come back out of the yurt.)*

DINAH. I love all the rugs and pillows that you have in there. It's like an Arabian tent. You know, it would be fun to have one of these in our back yard to sleep in during the summer – don't you think, Bill?

BILL. I'm happy with my bed.

JEANNETTE. So can I get you something to drink?

BILL. A Coke or a Pepsi if you have it.

JEANNETTE. We don't. We have water, juice. Or we can get into the wine.

BILL. Water will be fine.

JEANNETTE. Dinah?

DINAH. Oh, I'm good for now, thanks. Neil, you're looking a little peaked, are you feeling all right?

NEIL. I'm hanging in there, Dinah.

DINAH. Listen, if at any time you need to lie down or you've had enough and you need us to leave, just tell us. We're family, you don't have to be polite.

JEANNETTE. Actually, what would be really helpful right now is for Neil to smoke some pot.

DINAH. Oh. You mean medical marijuana?

JEANNETTE. Yes. It helps relieve his pain.

DINAH. I see. I think that would be all right with us. Bill?

BILL. If you don't mind, I'm going to wait in the car until you're done.

JEANNETTE. Do you want something to read?

BILL. There's a ball game on the radio.

JEANNETTE. All right. We'll let you know when it's done, Bill.

*(***BILL** *nods, makes an awkward exit.)*

DINAH. He just isn't comfortable with this sort of thing.

JEANNETTE. No problem. I'll be right back. I have to set Neil up.

*(***JEANNETTE** *goes into the yurt.* **NEIL** *settles himself on a padded chaise lounge which serves as his resting spot.)*

DINAH. Neil, is there anything I can do for you? Would you like a pillow?

NEIL. I'm fine, Dinah.

DINAH. It sure is a beautiful day. Does it stay this nice all year round?

NEIL. For the most part, yes.

DINAH. I saw a little heater in your yurt. How cold does it get here?

NEIL. When the fog rolls in it can get pretty chilly.

DINAH. I've never seen real fog. We don't really have it in the Midwest. We have other things. Tornadoes, blizzards, lightning storms, things like that…

NEIL. Dinah, it's all right. We don't need to make conversation.

DINAH. Oh, I'm sorry.

NEIL. No, I'm sorry. Finish your thought.

DINAH. Anyway. I'd like to see some fog. That would be neat.

*(***JEANNETTE** *comes out of the yurt with a vaporizer and their stash box.)*

JEANNETTE. Babe, we need to put in a call to Malcolm. We're running a little low.

NEIL. All right.

*(***DINAH** *watches* **JEANNETTE** *plug the vaporizer into an extension cord.)*

DINAH. That's a very interesting machine. What is that, is that like an electric bong?

NEIL. No it's a vaporizer. It doesn't burn the pot so there's no smoke. It just heats it enough to release the cannabinoids.

DINAH. So you get all the benefits without the drawbacks.

NEIL. Exactly.

DINAH. And it's probably not as addictive that way.

NEIL. Sure, yeah.

JEANNETTE. You good there, Babe? You need your water bottle?

NEIL. Yeah, I don't know where I left it…

DINAH. I'll find it –

JEANNETTE. No, I'll get it. Dinah, you sure you don't want something?

DINAH. Oh, a glass of water would be fine, thanks.

*(***JEANNETTE** *moves to the kitchen area.* **DINAH** *politely waits for* **NEIL** *to take a hit.)*

Neil, would you like some privacy…?

NEIL. No. I'm just waiting for it to heat up. It takes a few minutes.

DINAH. Oh, all right. Well, let me give you your presents.

JEANNETTE. Oh, Hon, you didn't need to bring us anything.

DINAH. It's no big deal, believe me. They're just a few little things that I made.

*(***DINAH** *fetches the shopping bag that she brought in with her.)*

DINAH. *(cont.)* Let's see, what should I give you first…

*(***DINAH** *pulls out a jar of preserves that she's labelled and decorated with a gingham cap.)*

Here're some strawberry preserves I made in June. I put up about fifty jars of the stuff.

JEANNETTE. You've been busy, Hon.

DINAH. As I said on the phone, nothing to do but to keep on moving.

NEIL. I like the packaging, Dinah.

DINAH. Oh, thank you. I enjoy making things look pretty. And here's another one of my projects. I'm not sure what you'll think of it, but I thought it was something you could use. I remember how much you love candles…

*(***DINAH** *hands* **JEANNETTE** *something wrapped in tissue and ribbon.)*

JEANNETTE. Oh, let me see.

*(***JEANNETTE** *unwraps a large candle in the shape of praying hands.)*

Oh, look at that.

NEIL. Buddha hands.

DINAH. Actually, I think it's supposed to be Christ's but that's all right, however you want to see it.

NEIL. No, Christ is good too.

DINAH. I made it out of beeswax because I remember you like more natural things.

JEANNETTE. Love beeswax. Love the smell.

NEIL. Straight from the hive. Beautiful.

DINAH. And Neil, I made something for you…

NEIL. Oh really?

*(***DINAH** *pulls out an afghan that she's crocheted out of a mix of brightly colored yarns.)*

DINAH. I hope you like all the crazy colors.

NEIL. Wow. You made this for me?

DINAH. Yes. I wanted it to be cheerful, you know, with everything that you've been going through.

NEIL. Let's try it out.

DINAH. I thought you might like this for the times when you need to lie down. You know, it'll keep you nice and cozy.

*(***DINAH** *tucks the blanket around* **NEIL**.*)*

NEIL. This is nice. Very nice. I feel much better already. This is a beautiful gift. Thank you.

DINAH. Oh I'm so glad you like it. I made one of these for Cindy to take to college with her and she told me that she loved to curl up in it at night when she was studying. She'd say to me, "I don't know, Mom, there's something about that blanket, it makes me feel smarter." Which was silly, she didn't need any help in that department. She was a straight-A student all through high school. Not that she was ever a show-off about it. She was too nice a person for that.

JEANNETTE. I remember she was such a sweet kid.

DINAH. *(a wave of grief)* Oh boy…

JEANNETTE. It's all right, Hon, let it go.

DINAH. I'm all right – it comes and goes. Like getting the hiccups.

(back to her bag of goodies)

Let's see, what else…

*(***DINAH** *pulls out a jar of pickles.)*

Oh, I made pickles. These are Grandma Henley's recipe.

JEANNETTE. You're kidding me, I loved her pickles.

DINAH. *(opening the jar)* Try one, tell me what you think.

JEANNETTE. Oh yeah, these are outstanding.

DINAH. Oh good, I'm glad they work. Neil, would you like to try one?

NEIL. No thank you, Dinah, they'd be wasted on me.

JEANNETTE. His taste buds got fucked up by the chemo.

DINAH. Oh, I'm so sorry.

NEIL. That's all right, I'm into other pleasures.

DINAH. Good for you.

*(***JEANNETTE** *has switched on the blower button of the vaporizer. The bag is expanding.)*

Oh look at that, it's just like a Jiffy Pop!

*(***JEANNETTE** *detaches the bag and attaches the mouth piece for* **NEIL**.*)*

*(***DINAH** *gets out an envelope of photographs.)*

Jeannette, I also brought some family pictures, because I know you lost all of yours in the fire.

JEANNETTE. Oh hon, that's so sweet of you.

*(***NEIL** *takes a hit.)*

DINAH. There's one in here of Cindy that I thought you'd like to have.

JEANNETTE. Oh, let me see.

DINAH. That was two summers ago when she was going on a bicycle trip with some of her friends.

JEANNETTE. What a sweetheart.

DINAH. Yes she was.

JEANNETTE. Look at that bod – those are serious biker's legs.

DINAH. Oh yes. She just loved to ride. She did one of those hundred-mile things for charity – it was for Children with AIDS or Heart Disease, one of those. She made over eight hundred dollars.

JEANNETTE. Good for her.

NEIL. She's got your eyes, Dinah.

DINAH. Yes, we have the same coloring.

NEIL. No, no, I meant that they were kind.

DINAH. Oh. Yes, she was. She wanted to go into nursing. She was very caring but she had a very practical side as well. When she was a freshman in high school, her uncle had to have a liver transplant and the donor was a young man who had died in a snow boarding

accident and Cindy was so moved by the fact that this young person had given her uncle a new life that she said to us one night at dinner, "You know, Mom, Dad, I am in great physical shape and I would be an awesome donor, so if anything happens to me, make sure you give all my parts away." She wasn't being morbid or anything, that was just who she was.

JEANNETTE. Sure.

DINAH. I wish we could have carried out her wishes. It would have been nice to know that somebody was walking around with her heart.

JEANNETTE. Did Bill not allow it?

DINAH. No, oh no, it wasn't that, no. Nothing could really be salvaged.

JEANNETTE. Oh shit. I'm sorry.

DINAH. Well. I like to think that Jesus was with her during her ordeal and that He was able to distract her with His love. I imagine that Cindy's soul was like a little bird that just flew out of a cage straight up to heaven into the arms of her Lord. There's some comfort in that. Anyway.

NEIL. Time to change the subject, Dinah?

DINAH. Yes, please.

NEIL. What other pictures do you have there?

DINAH. Well, let's see. Here's one of our Grandma Henley on the farm…

JEANNETTE. What a great old gal. She always wore that same ratty old apron.

DINAH. Do you remember how she used to keep corn feed in the pockets for the chickens?

JEANNETTE. Oh yeah.

DINAH. *(to* **NEIL***)* She'd hand it out to us when we went into the coop to get the eggs. Some of the chickens pecked at our hands so we'd throw the grain to get them off of their nests. But Jeannette was fearless. She would just shove her hand underneath those chickens. She didn't care what they did to her.

NEIL. That's my girl.

JEANNETTE. I wanted my treasure.

DINAH. And then she would throw the eggs at the boys. She used to make me laugh so hard I'd wet my pants.

NEIL. She still does the same thing to me.

JEANNETTE. Keeps you young, Babe.

DINAH. Oh, here's a nice picture of your mom and dad.

JEANNETTE. Ah, Sunday supper at the country club.

NEIL. And where's little Jeannette?

JEANNETTE. I'm just to the right of Mother wearing my gloves and Mary Janes. I was framed out because I was scowling.

DINAH. They were such an elegant couple. I always wished my parents were like them.

JEANNETTE. You're kidding.

DINAH. Your father was always well-dressed and Aunt Dolores was so cosmopolitan.

JEANNETTE. Yes, she thought she was. Her world-view was pretty provincial.

DINAH. Mom used to say that your parents were too much in love with each other which I always thought was a strange thing to say.

JEANNETTE. No, it's true. They were romantic narcissists. They just never should've had me. I was the intrusion.

DINAH. Oh no, I think they loved you very much.

JEANNETTE. In their own way. They were a unit unto themselves. Neil's parents were exactly the same way, only much crazier.

DINAH. Really.

NEIL. They only spoke French in the house.

DINAH. Oh. Were they from France?

NEIL. Detroit. And their French was outrageously bad. But they said it lubricated their relationship. Which it did. According to the old man they made love every day, twice a day for fifty years.

DINAH. Oh gosh.

JEANNETTE. And his mother had emphysema for the last ten years of her life so they'd hole up in their bedroom, smoking cigarettes next to the oxygen tank. It's a fucking miracle they didn't blow themselves up.

NEIL. It would have been a great way to go. BOOM.

DINAH. Oh dear.

JEANNETTE. It would have been a blessing for both of them. Lois had a miserable death.

DINAH. What happened?

JEANNETTE. She was starting to really deteriorate – she had lost the use of her legs. And then she fell off the bed and broke a hip but Frank refused to take her to the hospital.

DINAH. Why?

NEIL. He didn't want the male interns touching her.

JEANNETTE. This is an eighty-three year-old woman who's had three strokes, her kidneys are shot, she's breathing from half a lung –

NEIL. Well, he still thought she was hot.

JEANNETTE. Bless his horny heart.

DINAH. Oh, for goodness sake.

JEANNETTE. So we finally convinced him to check her in at the hospital and now he turns into a lunatic. He'll only speak to the staff in French –

NEIL. And of course they had no idea what the fuck he was saying.

JEANNETTE. And he refused to leave her side. He wouldn't even get up to go to the bathroom. He'd urinate in a bed pan which we had to empty because the nurses wouldn't touch it.

DINAH. Oh yuck.

NEIL. What was worse, the nurses stopped coming into the room because the old man drove them away.

DINAH. How awful.

JEANNETTE. He wouldn't even let her sleep. Every time she closed her eyes he would grab her face in his hands and scream at her to wake up.

NEIL. "Lois! S'eveiller! S'eveiller!"

JEANNETTE. And her poor little jaundiced eyes would pop open and she'd start wheezing and gasping for air. He scared her so badly he kept giving her heart attacks. Then he'd run into the hall yelling for help –

NEIL. "Code Bleu! Code Bleu!"

JEANNETTE. She was legally dead three times before the doctors finally let her go.

DINAH. Oh my gosh.

NEIL. And even when she was dead, he wouldn't leave her alone. He grabbed her shrunken body and hugged it so hard we could hear the ribs crack. We had to have him medicated, just to pry him away.

JEANNETTE. It was awful, it was just obscene.

DINAH. I guess he just loved her so much.

NEIL. No, it wasn't love. It was possession.

DINAH. Well I just know that if there had been anything I could have done to bring Cindy back – if they had let me see her body I probably would have held on so tight…

JEANNETTE. No, we understand.

DINAH. Bill was the one who saw her, to make the identification. He was able to be very objective about it. He said that what he saw had nothing to do with Cindy. What he saw was just an empty, broken vessel.

JEANNETTE. That's the only way to see it.

DINAH. But, as I said before, we both comfort ourselves with the knowledge that Cindy is now safe with her Lord and someday, when it's our time, we'll be with our girl again.

JEANNETTE. Well…I'm glad that you have that, Hon.

(a beat)

(to **NEIL***, the vaporizer)* Are you done there, Babe?

NEIL. I'm good for now, yeah.

JEANNETTE. Dinah, we're keeping this plugged in but I'll move it back here where Bill won't see it.

DINAH. Oh, thank you.

JEANNETTE. We're ready for lunch.

DINAH. Alrighty. I'll go get him.

*(***DINAH** *exits.)*

JEANNETTE. Shit, I didn't know they were Born-Again.

NEIL. I'm not surprised. Anyone who's been through a horror like that.

JEANNETTE. No, I get it. But she's really into the dogma.

NEIL. A little dogma doesn't hurt anyone as long as it's between consenting adults.

JEANNETTE. You're only saying that because you're stoned.

NEIL. I'm just trying to be tolerant.

JEANNETTE. I know, you're a saint, Babe.

*(***DINAH** *comes back with* **BILL**.*)*

Hey, Bill. How's your game?

BILL. My game?

JEANNETTE. On the radio.

BILL. Oh. The Tigers are ahead four to two.

NEIL. Go Tigers.

JEANNETTE. So are you ready for some lunch?

BILL. That would be fine.

DINAH. Tell me what I can do.

JEANNETTE. Nothing. Everything's all set. Just grab a plate.

*(***JEANNETTE** *goes to the kitchen area and uncovers the food which is laid out in mismatched bowls and platters donated by friends. There are chopsticks instead of forks.)*

DINAH. This all looks so delicious. Neil, can I fix you a plate?

NEIL. No thank you, Dinah, I'm a little limited in what I can eat.

JEANNETTE. I know what he wants. Just help yourselves.

DINAH. Look at this beautiful avocado. I love avocados. You can't find them at the supermarkets at home. But around here, they pretty much grow everywhere, don't they.

JEANNETTE. Oh yeah.

(one of the blackened trees)

That used to be an avocado tree.

DINAH. Oh really. So you just picked your own?

JEANNETTE. We didn't have to pick them, they just dropped on our heads. And over there was a pomegranate tree, that one was a fig. We had our own little Garden of Eden, right Babe?

NEIL. That's right.

DINAH. We put in a vegetable garden this year. Bill dug up a piece of the yard for me. Our development is on old farm land so we have beautiful soil. My peas are almost through and now my squash is coming in. And I have six tomato plants that are just getting huge. We're going to have more tomatoes than we'll know what to do with.

BILL. That's what canning is for.

DINAH. I'd love to try to grow an avocado tree.

JEANNETTE. I still have the pit. You can take it home with you if you want.

DINAH. Oh, I'd love that.

*(***JEANNETTE** *hands* **DINAH** *the seed from the avocado.)*

JEANNETTE. If you start it in water, you'll have roots in a week.

DINAH. With toothpicks!

JEANNETTE. That's right!

DINAH. How neat. Bill, look at this. Isn't this the most beautiful seed you've ever seen?

BILL. You'll never get it past security.

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