Sample Copy of Vesta

Hospice Foundation of America

By Bryan Harnetiaux

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Hospice Foundation of America
CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4W, 3M)

Vesta Pierson ............................... a widow, age 75 at beginning of play
Carol Barkes ............................... Vesta’s daughter, mid-forties at beginning of play
Kelly Barkes ............................... Vesta's granddaughter and Carol's daughter, age 16 at beginning of play
Jack Barkes ............................... Carol’s husband
Marc ............................... a medical social worker
Ms. (or Mr.) Burnett .............................. a middle management nursing home administrator
Mr. (or Ms.) Matthews .............................. a Medicaid worker
SETTING:   A bare stage except for a wheelchair and a chair, or something else to sit on. 
There may be benches on the periphery of the stage for the actors.

AT RISE:   VESTA PIERSON, age 75, emerges from the audience. VESTA'S daughter 
CAROL BARKES, granddaughter KELLY, son-in-law JACK, and MARC, 
the medical social worker, are all visible on the periphery of the stage. 
BURNETT and MATTHEWS may also be visible. At rise, VESTA is vital 
and animated. By the time she sits in the wheelchair, she is a stroke victim 
with faltering speech and moderate weakness on her right side.

(Note: Bracketed words may be substituted for words with asterisk when the play is done as a staged 
reading.)

VESTA
What a life. What a week! Monday I volunteer over at the county museum. Usually quiet as can be. 
Right after lunch, four summer school classes come through like locust, loud and landing on everything. 
You'd have thought the teachers gave strict instructions to dismantle the place. I tell you. These nice, 
hand-calligraphied signs that say "Please Do Not Touch" -
(Shakes head)
"Put that back, damnit!" We survived. I had a glass of wine with dinner. Tuesday. Tuesday, Mary can't 
come to pinochle, so I'm paired with Gwen, our substitute. We go through the same thing as last time. I 
tell her, Mary and I always bid up three if we're void in a suit. Twice she bids up three, and I let 
perfectly good hands go only to find she's bidding legs of pinochle instead. For heaven's sake. We did 
win two games. Bucked a head wind every inch of the way. At least Gwen will be back next week. Mary. Yes, Mary. Well, . . . yes, Wednesday, . . . Wednesday . . . the 
car. Harlan always changed the oil at two thousand feet, whether it was dirty or not. That little station 
over on Third. What's its name? Twenty percent off on Wednesdays for senior citizens. Right on 
schedule, one mile short of two thousand. Two thousand miles. I laid down a little after lunch. The 
headache went right away. In the afternoon I took Joe Marquez, down the street, to his doctor 
appointment. He and Harlan got along. Still talks about Harlan like he died yesterday. It's been almost 
eight years. It's harmless. He's eighty-nine and doesn't drive any more. Barely walks. He did some 
shopping on the way home. No sense Joe having to call a . . . a . . .
(A beat; VESTA is abstracted.)
Thursday . . . Thursday, I was putting out the trash . . . they tell me I had a stroke.
(VESTA is sitting in the wheelchair now, impaired.)
They say it wasn't a bad one. I can't imagine a good one. My right side. At least I'm left-handed. These 
fingers are in revolt. It's been all right here, for a hospital. Now I just want to go home. My own 
kitchen, own garden, own bed. 
(CAROL and KELLY appear.)

* * * *

CAROL
Kelly. 
(No response.)
Kelly!
Yeah. What?!

Are you done?

With what?

Writing grandma. I've got to go.

Mom . . .

Kelly!

All right, I'm doing it!

Well, hurry. I've gotta drop you off and I wanna mail it on the way.

(Vesta takes up a letter on her lap and reads, silently.)

Dear Gramma. Glad you're feeling better.

(Yelling to Carol.)

I don't know why I can't just call her.

You know she hates the phone. She loves letters - or visits.

Okay, okay. I have plans.

(Letter again.)

Mom says you get to go home Friday.

(Carol again.)

I saw her twice.

Twice in two weeks, Kelly?

(Groans; letter again.)

That's great! Glad you're feeling better. Oops, already said that. Double glad. Sorry you missed my
birthday party and all the neat gifts - hint, hint. I got my license yesterday and passed it the first time. Maybe I can drive Mom's Bomb over Saturday.

CAROL

Kelly?

KELLY

Yeah, and maybe my allowance'll go to a hundred dollars a week.

CAROL

Kelly, are you done?!

KELLY

(To CAROL.)
Okay, okay!
(To herself.)
Chill.
(Letter again.)
I'll probably take the bus... soon as I can. Love, Kelly. (To CAROL.)
I'm coming.

CAROL

Did you mention dad?

KELLY

(Letter again.)
P.S. Dad sends his love. Mom, too.
(VESTA stops reading. MARC appears. KELLY follows CAROL off.)

KELLY

Can I drive?!
(CAROL reacts, as MARC dictates. CAROL crosses to VESTA and resituates the wheelchair, “bringing VESTA home.” KELLY is gone.)

* * * * *

MARC

(Dictating into a small hand held tape recorder.)
Open file. Vesta Pierson, age seventy-five. Medicare eligible. See nurse workup for details. Referral - Good Samaritan Hospital, staff neurologist Salzberg, Alan J. Patient discharged on thirtieth to home. Lives alone, family in area. Work with Home and Health team number one. Schedule home visit next week; assess independent living capacity.
(MARC is gone.)

* * * * *
CAROL
Here we are, mom. God, is it hot! Well, how does it look?

VESTA
(Her speech has improved, but remains impaired. It will continue to improve hereafter.)
Like home.

CAROL
Kelly and I came by this morning and cleaned up.

VESTA
Cleaned up?

CAROL
Mom, it's been empty for two weeks. We just dusted and aired it out.

VESTA
The furniture.

CAROL
(Indicating wheelchair.)
We had to move it around for this* [the wheelchair]. To make room. We'll put it back when things get back to normal.

VESTA
You could have asked.

CAROL
We put a rail in the bathroom.

VESTA
To jump over?

CAROL
Mom! Jack put it in.

VESTA
Jack?

CAROL
Jack. It's not bad. He'll be by to see you at lunch. I've got appointments at eleven, twelve and one. So, how does it feel?

VESTA
Like I've been away ages.

(VESTA tries in vain to get out of her wheelchair.)
CAROL
Mom, you just got home. Give it time. Do you need anything? Hungry?
(VESTA shakes her head.)
I'll put something together for later. I should be back around four. I spoke to the Home and Health people this morning. The nurse is coming tomorrow. They're going to set up physical therapy, maybe some speech therapy. Not much. They've got an aide to give you a bath and there's a medical social worker to help out with the paperwork. Things like that.

VESTA
I don't want an army -

CAROL
They can help, mom. You can't drive right now. This way we don't have to chase all over town. I'll be around the first few days. Let's see what they're like. You need the pros at this point. You want to be able to stay here -

VESTA
I can't run away.

CAROL
Good. If it doesn't work out, we'll . . . look at something else.
(VESTA stares at CAROL. A beat.)

VESTA
Nursing home.

CAROL
I did not say that. You heard the doctor. He said that your stroke was mild, and with some therapy you should be fine. I'm gonna get my stuff.

VESTA
You don't have to.

CAROL
It's been a while since I stayed over. I don't want to worry twenty miles away.

VESTA
I can call one-nine-one.

CAROL
Nine-one-one.

VESTA
Anita, next door, can look in.
CAROL

Mom, I want to. I'm staying. And Kelly's coming by after school tomorrow. Well, we'll see. I'd like to call nine-one-one about her. Was I like that?

VESTA

The library books.

CAROL

I phoned in the list. I'm picking them up after work.

VESTA

Good.

CAROL

They asked about you. You saw the roses?

(VESTA nods.)

You can't push it, Mom. They said the reading would take a while.

VESTA

It's better already.

CAROL

I'm gonna bring over the extra television-

VESTA

No.

CAROL

Mom, listen. I know how you feel, but the double vision hasn't cleared yet and you're going to be cooped up for a while. You don't have to watch anything you don't want. It's not just cartoons -

VESTA

My brain is not dead.

CAROL

There's public television. We've seen a man walk on the moon.

VESTA

I can see the footprints from my porch.

CAROL

All right. You're gonna have some extra time on your hands, that's all. I'm bringing it, anyway. If you don't turn it on -

VESTA

(Overlapping.)

I won't. Not even plug it in.
CAROL
Fine, mom. That's up to you. I'm just trying to help. It's going to take some time and you're not used to that is all. You have to find other things besides reading for a while. I just don't want you getting discouraged. We'll all be by when we can. I'm sure it'll work out.

(VESTA is asleep.)

Mom?
(CAROL kisses her head, and is gone.)

* * * * *

(MARC appears. VESTA is awake now. She has a hand mirror in her left hand.)

Hello? Mrs. Pierson?

Yes.

MARC
We spoke on the phone. I'm Marc, the medical social worker from Home and Health. May I come in?

(VESTA signals MARC to come in.)

You're late. You said ten.

MARC
I'm running behind, sorry. May I sit down?

(VESTA nods; MARC sits.)

You the one that's supposed to cheer me up?

MARC
Do you need cheering up?

VESTA
That nurse thinks so.

MARC
Eileen?

VESTA
Eileen, she says so. You some kind of comedian?

MARC
Just a serious paper-pusher in a comic world. So, why does Eileen say you need cheering up?
VES

(Shrugs.)
My doctor's dead, you know. Checked me into the hospital, died two days later. Heart attack. Very sad, and inconvenient. I knew him for thirty years. Met this girl, Eileen, two weeks ago. Maybe because I'm not doing cartwheels for that physical therapist.

MARC
Cartwheels?

VESTA
Stand up, bend sideways. This way, that way. Touch the floor with your ear. I couldn't do that when I was twenty-five.

MARC
I think the idea is to try your best.

VESTA
Her best. My best isn't enough. You couldn't do it, you haven't had a stroke.

MARC
Tell me about your stroke.

VESTA
What do I know. I woke up in the hospital with a headache and this side on the fritz. I was putting out the garbage. Last thing I remember, I bent over to push down the lid. Thank God I flopped over on the recycling bin or I'd be in the landfill right now.

MARC
(Laughing.)
Who's the comedian here?

VESTA
A stroke is not funny, young man. That was a simple fact.

MARC
I'm sorry, I thought it was a joke.

VESTA
It wasn't.

MARC
I see you're working with our speech therapist.

VESTA
They think I need one. Just because I don't wanna talk doesn't mean I need speech therapy. I'm not a parrot. The woman came and did some tests. Said I had a minor deficit. Gave me some face exercises.
You seem to be doing pretty well.

(In indicating the mirror.)
I'm supposed to use this. She says this side of my mouth is drooping. So's the rest of me. That was a joke.

(MARC laughs.)
What is your name?

Marc.

Marc. Has me moving my mouth up and down, side to side, puckering like a fish. It's suppose to help if I watch.

Does it?

No. I feel like an idiot. I don't know why I'm even doing it.

You're getting over a stroke, Mrs. Pierson. It's not easy, even when it's a mild one. Have you eaten today?

Some tea, some toast.

Eileen doesn't think you're eating enough. You've lost some weight.

I don't feel like eating.

(Indicating the wheelchair.)
I'm in this most of the time.

What would you normally be doing, right now? Before the stroke.

What day is this?

Tuesday.
I'd have pinochle this afternoon. We played three days a week.

Where do you play?

We took turns, different houses.

Are they playing without you?

Oh, yes.

Have you talked to them about starting again?

They've been by. I told them I'd let them know.

Sounds like they miss you.

Probably sick of that idiot substitute, Gwen. (A beat.) I can't hold the cards.

If you work at it you should be able to. The physical therapist wants to help.

It's been almost a month. (Indicating the wheelchair.) If I'm out of this more than twenty minutes I'm exhausted.

You couldn't get out at all at first, could you? Mrs. Pierson, we want to help. Uncle Sam will pay for the services as long as there's a . . . an "expectation of improvement." It's really up to you. Do you think you'll be able to continue to live here and take care of yourself if you stay like this?

You're very clever. Diplomatic, too.
I'm just asking. I talked to your daughter, Carol. She thinks you can make it, but she's worried that you're a little down.

Probably scared to death.

She seems concerned.

Oh, she's been very solicitous.

That sounds like a carefully chosen word. The librarian in you.

Your form is well-informed.

How long were you a librarian?

Thirty-four years. At the university.

(Overlapping.)
Thirty-four years. And you love books.

At least my eyes are pretty much back to normal. Things don't look half as bad, now. I was circulation manager when I retired. Never had a degree. They gave me an honorary one my last year. If a student didn't know a word, they'd say "ask Vesta." I'd tell them, if I knew. Then make them look it up. So it would be theirs.

What word would you use to describe Vesta Pierson right now?

Inert.

That can change. I've got to go or I'll be late for my next appointment. Oh, a gift from the government. (MARC produces a small, red rubber ball and hands it to VESTA.) Actually, Chris, the physical therapist, asked me to give it to you. You're supposed to squeeze it five hundred times a day with your right hand and go up from there. She said you should do some with your left, too. Let me know if I can help. I'll be by a couple times a week, if that's all right?
VESTA

That would be fine - Marc.

MARC

(As he is leaving.)
Is that your car in the driveway?

VESTA

Yes.

MARC

It's a beaut. Nice meeting you, Vesta.
(MARC is gone.)

* * * * *

VESTA is up and looking off, in the direction of the driveway. She is squeezing the ball with her right hand. She switches the ball to her left hand and squeezes it some more. Her attention is again drawn to the driveway. She waves in that direction. Momentarily, KELLY appears carrying a grocery bag.

KELLY

Hi, Gramma.

VESTA

How did it go?

KELLY

Fine, just fine.

VESTA

You know, dear, I usually pull it farther in. Even with the house, remember? That way it's out of the afternoon sun.

KELLY

I'm sorry, I forgot. I'll go move it.

VESTA

No, no, it's all right for now. It's cloudy anyway.

KELLY

It drives real good, Gramma. It's real neat. I mean, it's old, but it's so simple to drive, yunno. It's so big. It barely fits between the parking lines at the store. Thanks for letting me drive, Gramma.

VESTA

Well, thank you for going to the store. Would you like to do it again next week?
DUSK

by

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Hospice Foundation of America
CHARACTERS

Gil ............................................................................... mid-sixties, recovering from a heart attack
Elizabeth ................................................................. a nurse practitioner
Nan .......................................................................... Gil’s daughter, around forty
Fitz ........................................................................... Gil’s son, late thirties
Micah ............................................................................ Gil’s son, mid-thirties

TIME AND PLACE:  Gil’s house; now
SETTING: An empty stage, except for a naturally finished wooden table and four chairs that may appear hand-made, not manufactured. On the table is a single sheet of paper, a bright-colored form.* Nothing else. There is also a somewhat dented tin can upright on the floor, some distance from the table.

AT RISE: The opening sequence until ELIZABETH arrives, spans a period of several weeks. GIL enters pushing a walker, with a grocery bag on its seat. HE is using a portable oxygen tank, and the rhythmic clicking of the oxygen delivery system may be heard. HE picks up the form and studies it.

GIL

You here? Nan!

(No response. GIL wads up the form and puts it back on the table, then exits. After several beats, NAN is heard, off:)

NAN

(Entering) Hello? Dad, you home?

(NAN carries a purse, or shoulder bag. SHE sees the wadded-up form and replaces it with a new one, then exits. After several beats, GIL enters without walker, but is using the portable oxygen tank, and has an unlit cigarette on his ear. HE picks up the new form and tears it into pieces, then puts the pieces in the center of the table and exits. Several beats later NAN enters and discovers the torn-up form and replaces it with a stack of forms and a brightly wrapped present, then exits. After several more beats GIL enters, with no oxygen and an unlit cigarette in his mouth, slightly more vigorous than before. HE ignores the forms, instead shaking and then opening the present. Inside is another form. GIL takes his Buck Knife from the sheath on his belt and drives it into the stack of forms, so that the knife stands upright, stuck in the table. HE then wads up the gift wrapping and remaining form, taking them with him as he exits. After a number of beats there is a knocking, off.)

ELIZABETH

(Off.) Hello. Hello. Mr. Everette?

(More knocking. GIL enters.)

* The form used in the play should be one commonly in use for providing physician orders for life-sustaining treatment. Any of a number of these forms may be used, as the precise form used in the play is not identified. See generally www.polst.org (website for National POLST Paradigm Initiative Task Force); www.wsma.org/patients/polst.html (Washington State Medical Association POLST state program).
GIL

Hold your horses, hold your horses.

(GIL waves ELIZABETH in, then sits at the table.)

It’s open.

(ELIZABETH enters.)

ELIZABETH

Hi –

(Seeing knife in forms.)

- Mr. Everette? I’m Elizabeth, from Home & Health. I spoke with Nan about coming by. She said she talked with you.

GIL

At me. She talked at me.

ELIZABETH

I understand she’ll be joining us.

GIL

She’ll be late. She was born late. You come to read me my rights?

ELIZABETH

I’m sorry, your -

GIL

You have the right to die. You have the right to die with dignity, and if you ain’t got no dignity we’ll find you some.

ELIZABETH

If this is a bad time –

GIL

Have a seat, Liz.

(ELIZABETH sits.)

ELIZABETH

Elizabeth. Nice centerpiece.

ELIZABETH

She’ll show, eventually. Got some time management issues.

ELIZABETH

Actually, I’m a little early.

ELIZABETH

Early, late . . .
ELIZABETH
Nan did say you’re willing to talk. Not wild about it.

GIL
(Finally noticing her.)
You’re the diplomatic type. It’s either talk to you or change the locks.

ELIZABETH
We could get started, if you’d like. We don’t have to wait. Unless you want to. This is about you.

GIL
I’m the one *in extremis*. Whadda you know ‘bout all this? You come in here, I thought maybe you’re sellin’ cookies.

ELIZABETH
You know, we actually met before. I came by when you were being discharged – we do some work at the hospital.

GIL
Sorry.

ELIZABETH
You were a little preoccupied with getting out of there. You asked if I had any cigarettes.

Ah, the woman with no cigarettes.

GIL
How are you feeling now?

ELIZABETH
They tell me I have a boggy heart. I’m feeling boggy.

GIL
How long since your heart attack?

ELIZABETH
[Names the month three months back.]

And you were in rehab for what, six weeks. And you live here alone.

GIL
(Pointing to an area on the floor.)
They found me right there, yunno. That’s what this is all about. Surprised she hasn’t taped it off. Says
I have to tell her what I want. So they’ll know what to do next time – call or throw a sheet over me. No more small talk, everything in capital letters. How old are you?

ELIZABETH
I’m not sure that’s – I don’t want to offend you Mr. –

GIL
Then don’t. I won’t tell. I mean, you gonna coach me, help me face the music. Someone not half my age, say twenty-eight –

ELIZABETH
Oh, much older.

GIL
We’re talking chops here, credibility. Maybe you lost a goldfish, your dog Sparky.

ELIZABETH
I’m a nurse practitioner. And I have an MSW.

GIL
What kinda mileage you get? Nurse practitioner. That like a physician’s caddy?

ELIZABETH
Is that how you see me?

GIL
Tell people you’re a nurse practitioner, they figure you can’t cut it as a doc. Ah, no different with me. Tell ‘em you’re a community college instructor, they’re busy thinkin’ you’re not a Ph.D. At a university, speaking in tongues.

ELIZABETH
There’s some of that.

GIL
I’ve got no problem with nurse practitioners, in general.

ELIZABETH
Thank you. I like what I do. And you?

GIL
I’m not doing much these days. Vocational instructor, wood shop. Not teaching this quarter - still on medical leave. I came at it a little late.

(Knocking on the table.)
Built furniture mosta my life. I’d have to work another five years for any retirement. ‘Least there’s medical.
ELIZABETH
And you’re sixty-four, oh, sixty-five tomorrow. How’s that feel?

GIL
Feels like hell. My turn. I get my thirty-eight pistol and set ‘er down right here, ask you to shoot me. Whaddaya say?

ELIZABETH
I’d say I don’t know you very well, Mr. Everette. And, I’d need to know if you’re having sport with me.

GIL
And I say no Liz, I’m not.

ELIZABETH
Then I would say no.

GIL
What if I just need bullets, would you drop by the hardware store?
(ELIZABETH shakes head “no.”)
Fine, ‘cause it’s already loaded and as soon as you walk out that door I’m gonna pick ’er up and – poof!

ELIZABETH
(Jotting a note.)
Kill yourself.

GIL
Kill myself.
(Indicating her note.)
Ah, “patient exhibiting suicidal ideation.”

ELIZABETH
(Showing GIL her entry.)
Feels like hell.

GIL
Last summer I hiked in Glacier with Micah. Forty miles. I get the mail now . . .

ELIZABETH
Micah?

GIL
My son. The youngest.
ELIZABETH
Nan said her brother might join us. She didn’t mention - that’s a lovely name. M-I-C-A-H?

GIL
Middle name’s “Six colon Eight.” Chapter six, verse eight. Old Testament. Do justice, love mercy, \textit{blah blah blah}.
(Explaining.)
That’s his mother, Wonder.

ELIZABETH
Wonder.

GIL
And the Sixties. She’d use anything if it served the cause.

ELIZABETH
And there’s Nan. Anyone else?

GIL
Oldest boy, in the middle. John Fitzgerald. Fitz. That was her idea, too. We met in the Peace Corps. Got married at a \textit{Three Dog Night} concert by a mail order minister with the Universal Life Church. Wonder’s big into symbols and signs. It’s all about discovering, becoming. She’s good at things like that, not so good at others.
(The LIGHTS change. ELIZABETH may take notes through the following, as if GIL is telling her this story. It is long ago. GIL is in the house and the three CHILDREN are outside playing the game "kick the can" with their (unseen) mother, WONDER. NAN rushes on and kicks the can just before FITZ gets to it.)

NAN
(Calling out.)
Got Fitz!

FITZ
Did not!

NAN
Did too, you’re out!

FITZ
Am not!

NAN
(Calling out.)
Fitz is out! Fitz is out!
(Rising, calling to the children:)
Nan, boys - soup’s on! Five minutes!

You’re not my boss.

(Calling out.)
Daddy, I kicked the can first. Fitz’s out. Tell him.

Fitz, you’re out.

She’s not my boss.

Nan, you’re not his boss.

You’re such a weenie. I quit. Micah, Mom - dinner! Game’s over!

It is not! I see you, Micah!
(She doesn’t.)
Come on out.

She can’t see you!

Can too.

Don’t be a sucker!

Time to wash up.

Come on. Mom’ll let you win anyway.

(Outside now.)
You boys, Wonder.
FITZ
Come on Micah, you weenie. Hey quick, she’s ’round back! Now, go, go now!
(MICAH bursts in, but NAN is there to kick the can, to FITZ’s great delight.)
What a bozo. She’s standing right there.

I saw her.

Yeah, yeah.

You coulda -

What?

He should talk. Fitz was out by five feet.

Mom’ll get us free.

She better!
(To NAN.)
You’re such an oinker.
(Calling out.)
Mom you better try!

Wonder can cruise, you watch.

Come and get it!

Just a minute!

(To GIL.)
What is it?!

Giraffe tenderloin an’ flamingo wings.
Mac ‘n cheese.

(NAN)

(To boys.)
Shut up, and don’t move.
(NAN runs off.)

FITZ

Mom, now! Mom!

MICAH

Wonder!

FITZ

She’s gone!
(NAN returns from opposite direction, out of breath.)

Aaugh!

NAN

I heard you guys.

GIL

Hey, everybody in.

NAN

Two more minutes.

GIL

Now, it’s almost dark!

FITZ

Come on, Mom! Nobody wins.

NAN

Mom!?

MICAH

(Overlapping.)
Wonder, dinner! Ollie, ollie oxen, free, free, free!

GIL

All right, let’s get in here. Wonder! Wonder?!
(The children are gone. The LIGHTS change. GIL is sitting again.)
She came by the hospital.
ELIZABETH

How was that?

GIL

She is who she is. Gave me this ointment from Peru. Organic sunflower extract. Supposed to rub it wherever it hurts.

ELIZABETH

And the kids?

GIL

They hate her, they love her. Fitz won’t talk to her. Ann still thinks I should have gone after her.

Ann?

GIL

Nan. Named after her mother. When Micah was little, it came out “Nan.”

(Indicating forms.)

What’s all this gotta do with that?

ELIZABETH

I don’t know.

GIL

All I’ve seen since this started is forms.

(Reading off form on top of pile.)

“Physician orders for life-sustaining treatment. Based on person’s medical condition and wishes. Please use black ink.”

ELIZABETH

Have you read it?

GIL

I take the Fifth.

ELIZABETH

Do you have a will, Mr. Everette?

(GIL does not respond.)

An advanced health care directive? Durable power of attorney? Anything?

GIL

More the grasshopper than the ant. No will, no 401(k), no God. Just a boggy heart and kids that don’t know what to do with me. Except fill the freezer with low-carb, no-cal meals that taste like – sawdust.
ELIZABETH

(Indicating form.)
And harass you with this. Why do you think Nan’s doing that? Or is she?

GIL

Ask her.

ELIZABETH

What about the boys?

GIL

Micah prays for me – he’s our pray-er. Fitz, Fitz lives in the [East/West], travels a lot. Who knows. You said this is about me, ask about me. Spare me all that sensitivity junk. I’m talking to you ‘cause I want my daughter off my back.

ELIZABETH

Fair enough.

(Indicating table.)
Mr. Everette, if the doctors set a new heart down right here and ask you if you want it you’d say –

GIL

Done.

ELIZABETH

And if they said that can’t happen –

GIL

Which is what they said. I’d say done.

ELIZABETH

What did you say?

GIL

(Staring at the spot on the floor where he was found.)
What’s to say. Huh … When I was on the floor … I was back in Alaska. Deckhand on a salmon trawler during college, before all the fish-finder gadgets. You’d watch the water, look for where they’d boil on the surface. The salmon’d find a school of herring, close in on it. The herring’d run out of room, outa water. They’d flare up maybe eight, ten feet, thousands of ‘em. Then drop back down.

ELIZABETH

That must have been a sight. And where are you in all this?

GIL

Watching from the boat.

ELIZABETH

I’m just getting to know you, Mr. Everette. You don’t seem like someone watching from the boat.
GIL

(Catching himself; agitated.)
This going pretty much by the book? You slowly, tenderly maneuvering me into talking about what I don’t want to talk about?

ELIZABETH

Maybe. You’re holding your own. Most of us don’t want this conversation. Some do. And some are willing to try – see what happens. It’s your choice. This form is so we, everyone – family and strangers – know what you want if there’s another emergency. When you can’t say, and there’s no time to dig out a will or health care directive. It’s a way to guard against care providers doing something you really don’t want. Or not doing something you do. Nan doesn’t know, Mr. Everette.

(Indicating knife in forms.)
And we’re getting mixed signals. I’m not here to convert you, or convince you of anything. I’m just here to listen, and answer any questions. How angry are you?

GIL

I’ve had some soup and crackers.

ELIZABETH

(Laughing.)
No I, I’m sorry. I said how angry are you.

GIL

(Laughing, too.)
Ahh. Did I mention my hearing’s going? Eyes ‘r blurry, feet swelling. My lips are thinning. And my faucet leaks. I see someone, first thing I think - they’re fine and I’m not. Meet someone worse off, can’t even enjoy that. That’s next. Mark me down as hungry. Starving.

(Fighting off being upset, GIL moves upstage and looks out the window.)
You’re a mean one.

ELIZABETH

You got it. They send me to work over the boggy-hearted.

(Something catches GIL’s eye outside.)
What do you want to do, Gil? This can wait, or we can walk through it.

(Producing the form.)
I’ve got an extra one here.

GIL

She keeps saying it won’t kill ya. Anyone croaked on you going over this?

(ELIZABETH shakes head “no.”)

ELIZABETH

You must have thought about it.
In general. Different when it’s shoved under your nose.
(GIL gestures to go ahead.)

ELIZABETH
Okay.

GIL
I’m not promising –

ELIZABETH
Agreed.

GIL
If this does kill me, you tell her. Maybe put together a control group, see if statistically there’s more harm than good. New England Journal of Medicine – call it the Gil Syndrome.

ELIZABETH
So when you think about death, is it the herring? I mean, feeling closed in, trapped.

GIL
We gonna talk symbolism here or your damned form.

ELIZABETH
Sometimes it can help get at this. The image you have. Choirs of angels, sickle and scythe, a Black Hole.

GIL
You give me too much credit. Way back, I knew I was going to die young before my time. The whole Deadman’s Curve thing. You get past that, just get caught up in living.

ELIZABETH
You haven’t come face to face before.

GIL
Dad died in World War II when I was little. Mom in her sleep at eighty. There was this day out of Portland.

(A train whistle in the distance. The lights change as GIL moves away from the table and looks off in the distance. HE sits as if between the rails of a railroad track, in the midst of other unseen protestors. GIL divides his time looking intently up the track, as if over others, for the approaching train, and in watching for his CHILDREN. MICAH enters, followed by NAN. They are relieved to find GIL.)

MICAH
Here he is!
Holding on ~ Letting go

by

Bryan Harnetiaux
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For

Hospice Foundation of America

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CHARACTERS
(in order of appearance)

Lee (Leoneta) – 50 years-old; Bobby’s wife

Bobby – 51 years-old; Lee’s husband, with end-stage liver failure

Virginia – a hospice registered nurse

May – early 70’s; Bobby’s mother

Gabe – a hospice medical social worker

Roger - a hospice chaplain

TIME AND PLACE:  Now; Bobby and Lee’s home, and nearby

THE SET:  Keep it very simple.

For Bryan Jackson

(October 23, 1963 – July 21, 2009)
SCENE 1

Lights up on a table and chairs. There are cups, and a folder with forms on the table. A purse is on one of the chairs. Lee enters with a small suitcase on rollers, mid-conversation on her Blue Tooth phone.

LEE

(Into phone.)
Carl, no. No. That is not gonna happen. We’ll play one game, our house. Tell him, take it or leave it. No quid pro quo. We’re not taking the team to that cow barn and risk getting home-towned. Uh – uh. Carl, he has no chips here. A second rate program in a third rate conference that’s in the boondocks.
(Covering speaker on earpiece, calling out.)

Bobby?

(Carl again.)

No, I’m home now. Well, he’s wrong. I do not owe him a thing. That was fifteen years ago. Assistant to the assistant to the assistant. Had me runnin’ lines with the girls, keepin’ stats, patrolling the locker room for bleeders, as he put it. I cleared the books when we invited them to the Thanksgiving tourney three years ago. I’d tell him that to his face, if it weren’t your job.

(At open patio door, looking outside.)
Look, I gotta go. Oh, Becky, yeah.

(LEE crosses and looks at the papers on the table.)
I think she’ll sign. I like her. Big girl. Born with a basketball under her arm. Coachable, from all I hear.

(VIRGINIA and BOBBY enter. He is thin and obviously ill. LEE surprises them. Playfully.)

Ah-ha. How long has this been going on?!

BOBBY

About ten minutes.

(LEE signals to hold on for a moment.)

LEE


(LEE takes Blue Tooth off, and kisses BOBBY, somewhat awkwardly)
Okay. There. Sorry, L-G-O.

BOBBY

(Explaining to VIRGINIA.)
Life goes on.

Hospice Foundation of America
Carl says hi.

BOBBY

How was the trip?

LEE

A blur.

(To VIRGINIA)

Recruiting season. I’m Lee.

VIRGINIA

Hi. Virginia. I’m a big fan. Welcome home. You have a lovely home, and garden.

LEE

Oh, that’s Bobby’s. We call it Little Madison. Square Garden.

VIRGINIA

Oh. Sorry. Of course. Duh.

BOBBY

Virginia’s a nurse. With Hearthstone.

LEE

(Settling in; looking for Blackberry.)

Hearthstone.

VIRGINIA

Hearthstone Hospice.

LEE

Yeah, yeah.

BOBBY

There’s tea.

LEE

You’re the ones gonna help out. Thank you.

BOBBY

We’re just starting. We were waiting.

LEE

It was gridlock at the airport.
VIRGINIA
No problem. We’ve been looking at some of the paperwork. You’re back on the road again tomorrow?

LEE
Just for the day.

BOBBY
(Picking up cups.)
I’ll get you some. Lee?

LEE
(LEE shakes her head; watching BOBBY exit.)
Prob’ly too early for a drink. That chemo…I thought May might fatten him up while I was gone.

VIRGINIA
Bobby’s mother?
(LEE nods.)
She’s the primary caregiver, when you’re not available?

LEE
Oh, I don’t know about that. Have you met May?
(VIRGINIA shakes her head.)
Not sure who’s primarin’ who. We’ve had an attendant some a’the time, from a local service. So, how is he?

VIRGINIA
We’re - it’s a little early to say. We just got the referral from Dr. Cruz. What do you think?

LEE
Oh, I’ve been gone all week. We talked mornin’ and night. I don’t know … thinner. Bobby never was fat. He’s always been pretty buff. It’s hard to tell. I know the treatment’s been a bearcat. The problem is Bobby gets down. I mean, not really down. He’s a glass-half empty kinda guy.
(LEE checks her Blackberry.)
Wasn’t always like that.

BOBBY
(Entering with VIRGINIA’s tea.)
You reel in that center from Portland…ah, Becky?
LEE
(Waving her Blackberry.)
Close. Bobby picks her out. I’ve got him looking at film on another player, he starts in on Becky - talkin’ her up. Right under my nose, never saw her. *Duh.*

BOBBY
Just lucky. Sometimes you’re lookin’ for one thing, stumble on something else.

LEE
This man’s the best scout there is. Was the best coach. Well, best boy’s coach.

VIRGINIA
I remember when you were both at State, at the same time. That article in *Sports Illustrated.*

LEE
Bobby had a lot of fans. He still gets mail – When you comin’ back?

Do you miss it?

VIRGINIA

BOBBY
Oh, long time ago. Just dabble. Sell insurance now. Did. Still miss game day. Somethin’ about game day. Life’s bigger. Otherwise, no. Not like Lee. She eats that stuff up. Seemed like I was always tryin’ to catch my breath.
(A beat.)
So, can we…?

VIRGINIA
Oh. Sure.

LEE
Ready.
(Indicating Blackberry.)
Got my calendar right here.

VIRGINIA
So, Bobby’s gone over some of the forms. I’ve got the basic information down. We can pick up wherever you want.

BOBBY
Lee’s a quick study.
( Sliding some of the papers LEE’S way.)
She’s got the intake form, patient bill of rights, disability coverage. Virginia says looks like our supplemental coverage should kick in. It better, sold it to myself.
VIRGINIA
I think you’ll be fine. This really’s Gabe’s department. Our medical social worker.

LEE
Social worker?

VIRGINIA
We’ll double check with him. He tries to drop by in the first few days. You’ll like Gabe, straight shooter. Even with all the regs – regulations- he keeps it simple.

BOBBY
I’m all for simple.

SO, how are you?

VIRGINIA
Tired. Mainly tired.

BOBBY
Some of that could be left over from the chemo. When did you finish up?

BOBBY
Week ago – ah, yesterday.

VIRGINIA
You may find you’ll feel better for a while. And the pain?

BOBBY
Better, since he bumped up the dose. Guess he had to. It wasn’t workin’. I let it go, try to do without, this whole side’ll light up.

VIRGINIA
On a scale of one to ten, right now?

BOBBY
Maybe a three.

LEE
That’s a six for anybody else. Bobby’s got a high pain threshold. Junior year, played half the season with a stress fracture. Never said a word. They finally pull him out, he’s hobblin’ down the court. ‘Member. I nursed him back to health.

BOBBY
Is that what that was?
VIRGINIA
That’s all good. We won’t use the hard stuff, ‘til we have to. You have to tell us. As it gets worse. There’s no reason to be uncomfortable from here on out. Dr. Cruz’ll order whatever you need, and we’ll line it up.

LEE
You’re talkin’ about worse. What about better?

VIRGINIA
Ah, if that happens, great. Otherwise, we’re here to help Bobby manage the pain – keep you comfortable.

LEE
So if Bobby’s say … if we’re gone, on a trip or something – how does that work? Do you put together a travel kit, or something like that?

BOBBY
Travel?

LEE
Oh, yunno, I’ve been lookin’ around. You know that.

VIRGINIA
You’d want to check with Dr. Cruz.

LEE
We need his permission?

VIRGINIA
No, but he’s –

BOBBY
(Overlapping.)
Lee, I’m not going anywhere.

VIRGINIA
- what with the referral, and the end of therapeutic treatment, it’s really –

LEE
(Blindsided.)
What? Whoa!? 
(There’s a long silence. LEE picks up some of the papers and looks at them for the first time.)
What have you done?
BOBBY
Cruz said there’s … on Tuesday. There’s no more treatment. It didn’t stop it. The new results…they’re worse. It spread more. Alot. He ran it by his colleagues –

LEE
Why didn’t you say somethin’?

BOBBY
You were on the road. I tried. Hard to do on the phone.

LEE
How hard is it to say come home?

BOBBY
I thought I did. You didn’t say…I figured couple days one way or the other.

LEE
Bobby!

VIRGINIA
It might be best if I came back.

LEE
Yes, it might. We’re sorry for any incon-

BOBBY
No.

LEE
Yes. This is my fault, being gone.

Please.

BOBBY
We’ll call if we -

LEE
She is staying.

BOBBY
Then I’m leaving.
Lee, there’s nothing –
(To VIRGINIA.)
I need you to explain.

LEE
I’m not having this conversation with a stranger.

BOBBY
Hey, come on, Virginia’s tryin’ -

(Ending BOBBY off.)
‘Course you two go way back.

VIRGINIA
Lee, I want to apologize. I thought, I assumed we were all at the same place. My fault. We need to back up. Start over.

BOBBY
Good. Who wants to be sick this time. Not it.

LEE
Don’t.

VIRGINIA
Perhaps there’s a minister or counselor –

LEE
No.

VIRGINIA
We have chaplains avail –

LEE
No!

BOBBY
Will you just let her explain.

LEE
What? That while I was gone you gave up. That you, you let this into our home.

BOBBY
Honey, I didn’t let it in. It’s here. It’s been here.
LEE
Lying to me all week. I woulda’ come back.

BOBBY
I got by. You were getting done what you needed to get done. Mama was around.

LEE
Oh, there’s a comfort. She’s got his bags packed and the train’s leavin’ the station.

BOBBY
(To VIRGINIA)
Please. Tell her.

LEE
Tell me what. That you two eloped?

VIRGINIA
I think Bobby wants me to explain why I’m here.
(BOBBY nods.)
Lee, with Bobby’s liver failure, we need to make sure he’s –

LEE
Comfortable. Yeah, I get it.

BOBBY
Let her talk.

VIRGINIA
We want to help Bobby, both of you, through this. With hospice care, there’s a prognosis of six months or less. There’s every indication nothing’s going to happen right away. Bobby may have many good days. Dr. Cruz’s report suggests we could be at three months, maybe less. Our work does not hurry the dying process. Hopefully it makes it, maybe not easier – but more tolerable. We have incredible resources available. Physical, spiritual, help with practical, everyday problems. We have a team –

LEE
We do not need a team. Thank you. You’re here because this good man is tired and broken, and – you know this Bobby – he’s a quitter.

BOBBY
Quitter!

LEE
And no one’s been watching out for him.
I am not a quitter.

You’re giving up. Just like coaching.

Oh, man. I was fired.

And you didn’t deserve it. Player injuries, bad luck, politics.

That’s not quitting.

Just walked away, gave up. Stayed fired. Never tried to go back somewhere else.

I did too.

Oh, a couple phone calls, glance at the want ads.

Lee.

You quit something you loved, and now you’re quitting me. And your new girlfriend here’s ready to make it happen.

Why are you getting so worked-up?

‘Cause you’re not!

Bobby, tell me about the disease. What happened, how it started?

Summer before last, I had some pain down here and … my bowels. Turned out to be colon cancer. They did surgery, chemo, radiation. There was some lymph involvement. Things looked good for a while. Six months later, shows up in my liver. Too much to operate. Tried more chemo. Turned me inside out [or Bombed the shit outta me] three
times a week. New experimental drug. Now it’s in my bones. Left hip, a rib, maybe two. Cruz threw everything they had at it. We ran outa’ options. Said we should talk to you.

LEE
We’re not done, Bobby. Not yet. There are people -

BOBBY
The Internet.

LEE
See, this is what I’m talking about. You just lay down. There are possibilities out there. Western medicine, it’s scary how little they know. When the drugs can’t cure you, their gadgets don’t work, they numb you up and shut you down. Don’t do this. I found someone. There’s this Healer outside of Dublin.

BOBBY
Dublin!?

LEE
He was a physician, educated at Johns Hopkins. Left it all. Does holistic healing now. I’ve been talking with his assistant. They’ll take you on. It’s a two-week protocol to flush the system. Three week follow-up, with a managed diet. It’s new, and rigorous, but he’s very encouraging. Don’t do this.

(To VIRGINIA.)
Wouldn’t you try it if you could?

VIRGINIA
I really don’t know.

LEE
Sure you do. A chance versus nothing.

VIRGINIA
It would be tempting. Look, I know this is hard. Even brutal. But it is. We hope it isn’t, but that’s not what they’re telling us. All I can say is we are here to help you, when you’re ready. If you’re not ready, we’ll come back. If you want us.

BOBBY
Are you saying I should do this, go to Dublin?

VIRGINIA
No, no. That’s up to you. You do need to be careful, Bobby. You’re very vulnerable right now.

(LEE’S Blackberry vibrates on the table, and all work hard to ignore it.)
From what I see here, I have concerns about this kind of trip. The distance, possible complications.
LEE
Like what? What could be worse than this, this this death watch?

BOBBY
(Laughing.)
Leoneta. Come on, now. There’s nothing left.

LEE
How do you know?

BOBBY
I am not a quitter. I’m a realist.

LEE
You’re depressed. You’ve fought this for over a year. You’re worn out, your spirit’s gone and you won’t listen. Bobby - no I need to say this - you are 51-years-old and you want to forfeit. You are a strong man, even after all this. There are still things to be done…and I want to do it. I’m glad to do it. I need to do it - for us. You’ve stopped looking for answers.

BOBBY
This is my answer. I’m trying to … but, no, you’re gonna draw up a Hail Mary play. Some buzzer beater.
(The Blackberry vibrates again. This time LEE picks it up; on exit.)

LEE
Gotta take this – Becky’s folks, L-G-O.
(LEE exits.)

BOBBY
That’s Lee. I don’t know what she’s thinking. She knows I don’t speak Irish.
(BOBBY and VIRGINIA manage a smile.)

Blackout

SCENE 2

LEE is at the table, on her laptop. MAY enters hurriedly, out of breath. She has a large bag with her. At some point she may pull knitting materials out of her bag and knit.

MAY
Is he gone?!