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The Old Fart Plays

By

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Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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(THE OLD FART PLAYS)

ISBN: 978-1-61959-322-0

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to acknowledge the publishers and theatre companies that brought several of these plays into print and onstage prior to the publication of this collection.

Stuck in the Middle With You appears in *Raging Thru the Dark: Drama, Poetry, Art* (Autumn 2022).

Steering Into the Skid was a semifinalist in the 2012 Minnesota Shorts Play Festival; won the 2013 MemoryCare One-Act Competition to benefit the MemoryCare Alzheimer's/dementia facility in Asheville, N.C., and was subsequently published in *The MemoryCare Plays*; and won the 2018 Town & Gown Players 5th Annual Stillwater Short Play Festival (Okla.). The play has had more than 100 readings and performances nationwide in support of dementia education and fundraising, including many by MemoryCare and The Remember Project (Minn.), and has been staged by Love Creek Productions in New York City.

A half-hour radio version of *Recalculating* was produced on WMUK-FM Kalamazoo as part of the *All Ears Theatre* radio series. A revised version was broadcast by On The Air Radio Players of Richmond, Va. A shorter stage version has been produced by Northwoods Theatre Company of Ironwood, Mich.

Continuum of Care received a staged reading by The Naples Players (Fla.) as a winner of their 2022 Readers Theatre – New Play Festival.

Come Rain or Come Shine was originally commissioned in 1999 by the Western Michigan University Alumni Association for presentation to the reunion of the class of 1949. In 2019, the play was a winner in the Heartland Theatre Company's (Ill.) New Plays from the Heartland festival.

The Old Fart Plays

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For Ed, Karen, Amy and Andy.

Hogmanay

CHARACTERS

MOLLY: 60s, BEN's third wife, stylish and enthusiastic.

BEN: 60s, director of the Chicago Maritime Museum.

WALLACE: 60s.

SHARON: 60s, MOLLY and BEN's neighbor.

AMY: About 40, WALLACE's daughter, an attorney.

LIZZY: Mid-30s, BEN's daughter from his first marriage.

TIME: The present, New Year's Eve.

PLACE: The living room of MOLLY and BEN's home in Oak Park, Ill.

NOTE: "Hogmanay" (HUG-ma-NAY) is the Scots word for the last day of the old year and is synonymous with the celebration of the New Year in the Scottish manner. It is normally followed by further celebration on the morning of New Year's Day, January 1, or in some cases January 2—a Scottish bank holiday. The origins of Hogmanay are unclear, but it may be derived from Norse and Gaelic observances of the winter solstice. Customs vary throughout Scotland and usually include gift-giving and visiting the homes of friends and neighbors, with special attention given to the "first-foot," the first guest of the new year.

"As he aged, Auden said that methods of dry farming might also grow crops."

—Donald Hall's "Meatloaf"
The New Yorker; July 20, 2009

SCENE 1

(At rise, BEN and MOLLY enter from the outside, carrying shopping bags and talking. Their living room is stylish, the walls adorned with good art. MOLLY, still talking, takes off her long cape in a swirl and drops it on the couch.)

MOLLY. *We*, my dear, we completely convinced that smart-alecky young girl that we're old farts.

BEN *(setting down the shopping bags and putting his coat on a hanger in the closet as he talks)*. *We?* You were the one asking about sherry.

(MOLLY sits on a wooden bench by the door and takes off her expensive high-heeled boots.)

MOLLY. I was asking if they had shortbread, too.

BEN *(taking a pair of flat, elegant slippers from the closet)*. But you were looking at the rows of liquor bottles behind the counter.

MOLLY *(as BEN puts the slippers on her feet)*. I was looking for sherry. Asking about shortbread and looking for sherry. Multitasking.

BEN *(imitating the store clerk)*. "We don't carry that." She thought you were asking about some kind of liqueur called shortbread. You know, like Cakebread Port. Something she might find where you were looking.

(There is no break in their conversation as they rise and move. BEN hangs up the cape, then he and MOLLY unpack their purchases. He sets out sherry, Scotch and glasses, while she gets a plate and opens the shortbread.)

MOLLY. After I managed to explain it to her, she called it “shortbread cookies.” It’s not cookies; it’s shortbread. Graham’s shortbread. I should have been baking my own, saving some money.

BEN. We don’t want you burning yourself again. Besides, the real extravagant buys were the sherry and the Laphroaig (*la-FROYG*).

MOLLY. Which you confused her further about by calling it Leapfrog.

BEN. Force of habit.

MOLLY. Family jokes belong in the family. (*They kiss, enjoying the joke.*) You can’t celebrate without the right stuff.

BEN. No doubt. But we’ll have to watch our budget for the next week or two. That girl at the liquor store should have been a lot more solicitous, considering what we spent.

MOLLY. Why would she care? It’s just a job to her. And everybody’s spending on New Year’s Eve. (*A beat.*) She had pink and green skulls tattooed on her arm.

BEN. Now you *are* sounding like an old fart. (*Opening a bottle of Scotch.*) Then you had to mention it was for the Scottish New Year at six o’clock. She had no idea what you were talking about. Again.

MOLLY. So she follows us over to the shelves and says to us, as if talking to a child or a doddering old fool. (*In a condescending voice.*) “Here’s the sherry, right here.” And she points to it.

BEN (*continuing in the clerk’s voice*). “And over here are the shortbread *cookies*.” And she points again.

MOLLY. And to top it off, she had the entertaining spectacle of my tripping on the mat.

BEN. At least you didn't end up on the floor this time. That would have put a crimp in our plans. Lucky I was close enough to catch you.

MOLLY. Lucky we both didn't hit the deck. If I'd grabbed onto you.

BEN. Lucky we got home when we did. It's getting slippery out there. The rain's turning to ice.

MOLLY. You shouldn't have canceled the plowing service.

BEN. The service costs too much. I can do it myself.

MOLLY. So you say.

BEN. You just need to slow down. Now. Catch your breath. Sit. I'll get everything ready. (*A beat.*) It's those fancy shoes. You seldom fall when you're wearing sensible shoes.

MOLLY. Sensible shoes. *Old lady* shoes. Like the ones I made my mother wear. I shouldn't have done that. It was unkind.

BEN (*putting his arm around her*). Oh, sweetheart. We both need to take care. Sensible's not so bad.

MOLLY. Sensible is not how I roll. (*Looking at her watch.*) We need to watch the clock. Hogmanay will be here in about twenty minutes. We've left it too late.

BEN. We haven't left it too late. We have plenty of time. (*A beat.*) I'll just give Lizzy a quick call.

(He takes his cellphone from his pocket.)

MOLLY. Not now, you don't. Daughters are supposed to call parents, not the other way 'round. Anyway, we don't have time.

BEN (*pocketing his phone again*). We'll be ready.

MOLLY. Turn on the TV so we know exactly when the New Year is. All my life, this was a special moment.

BEN. And it still is.

MOLLY. All the relatives—aunts, uncles, cousins, the whole Sutherland clan—crowded in my parents' living room, the men drinking Scotch, the women drinking sherry. Eating shortbread. Fern cakes, Empire biscuits, sausage rolls, haggis. Black bun. Sent over from that bakery in Detroit. Turn on the TV. Put it on mute. Pour some sherry for the woman.

BEN. And I've learned to love Leapfrog.

MOLLY. It's New Year's Eve, Ben. Men all love Scotch. Go ahead. Open the sherry for me. There was always fresh Loch Duart Scottish salmon.

BEN. As fresh as it could be after a three-thousand-mile airplane ride. Salmon's salmon.

MOLLY (*ignoring this*). Finger sandwiches—cucumber and gammon.

(As they talk, he gets the glasses and pours a Scotch for himself and a sherry for her. She puts the shortbread on a plate.)

BEN. Gammon. Scottish for ham. Sutherland for ham.

MOLLY. Oatcakes. Foundation of a Sutherland feast. To soak up the alcohol.

BEN. Oatcakes. Like eating the padding from a mailing envelope.

MOLLY. No one forced you to eat them. And my mother's shortbread. No one's ever been able to make it like her. I'm not sure the commercial brands use real butter. This Graham's stuff won't be the same.

BEN. Just the way no one could make *goulash* like *my* mother.

MOLLY. But my mother was a lady. A Scottish lady.

BEN. A genteel twig on the Sutherland family tree. Certainly not like her ancestors when they presided over the Highland Clearances. Burning farms and turning women and children out in the cold to starve.

MOLLY. That was a long time ago. We've rehabilitated ourselves with good works.

BEN. Unlike my family, who were probably Middle European brigands and cutthroats. Irredeemable goulash-eaters.

MOLLY. No one could spend two days making goulash with a pot stinking up the whole house the way your mother did.

BEN. She was a bitch. Unbending. Uncompromising. Nevertheless, a part of *my* tradition. And the Scots have plenty of their own inedible treats. Haggis, black pudding, Cullen skink, whatever the hell that is.

MOLLY. Oh, Ben, for heaven's sake. You have no attachment to tradition. No sense of family rhythm.

BEN. It don't mean a thing if you ain't got that swing. (*He perches on her chair and puts an arm around her.*) We'll be all right. We just have to cut back on expenses.

MOLLY. Will we? All my temporary jobs at galleries that never got reported to Social Security?

BEN. We'll be fine. My retirement is guaranteed.

MOLLY. Such as it is. And don't you dare tell me to relax.

BEN. Relaxed is not how you roll. (*A beat.*) Our good luck will hold. We found each other, didn't we?

MOLLY. We can't even depend on a first-foot. Either now or at midnight.

BEN. We'd have to be a lot more social than we've been lately. We used to throw New Year's Eve parties—or be invited to them.

MOLLY. Things change. I do like a quiet celebration now. I notice none of your colleagues at the museum invited us to anything. Whatever happened to trying to impress the boss?

BEN. They're all keeping a low profile, hoping I'll announce my retirement, but trying not to seem too eager to boot me out the door.

(His phone rings.)

MOLLY. And speaking of family rhythm, that's Lizzy, no doubt. She would call. Right now. *(She kisses his hand as he rises to get his phone from his pocket.)* Remind her about moving her stuff out of our basement. I hate doing laundry surrounded by glassed-in boxes of dead bugs skewered on pins. Her weight bench and dumbbells. Taped-up mystery boxes labeled with stuff her ex made her hang onto. Who knows what else? Just don't talk too long.

BEN. We don't have much to say to each other these days. *(Answering his phone.)* Oh, hello, Ted. Happy New Year. *(Listening.)* Thanks. Nice of you to call. *(Listening.)* Oh. Not just a holiday greeting then. *(Listening.)* Sure. I understand. *(Listening.)* Wednesday at two. I'll be there. *(Listening.)* Goodbye, then. *(He clicks off the phone.)*

MOLLY. What was that about? Ted who?

BEN. You know who.

MOLLY. So?

(Before BEN can answer MOLLY, the phone rings again, and he clicks it on.)

BEN. Hello, Lizzy. Happy New Year. *(Listening.)* Yeah. Nearly six o'clock. We're getting ready for midnight in Scotland. *(Listening.)* Hogmanay, sweetheart. "Auld Lang Syne." "Should auld acquaintance be forgot?" *(Listening.)* Burns, baby, Burns.

(There is a sudden huge crash outside. The lights flicker and come back on. MOLLY goes to the window and looks out.)

BEN *(cont'd)*. What was that?

MOLLY. Oh, Ben. Call nine-one-one.

BEN. I'm talking to—

MOLLY. Call nine-one-one.

BEN. Lizzy, there's an emergency. I have to go. I'll call you back. *(Beat.)* Happy New Year.

MOLLY. Call. Call.

BEN. What is it? *(He goes to the window and looks out.)* Oh my God.

MOLLY. There goes Scottish New Year.

BEN. I'm sure the Scots will manage without us.

(Lights snap to black. Between scenes in the black, we hear sirens and see blue and red flashers.)

SCENE 2

(As the lights rise. WALLACE, sixtyish, is sitting with MOLLY and BEN standing nearby. SHARON, their next-door neighbor, also in her sixties, is hovering. WALLACE's shirt is bloody and his head is bandaged.)

WALLACE *(to SHARON)*. I wish you hadn't called nine-one-one. What's your name again?

SHARON. Sharon. Your car was wrecked and you were covered in blood. Being on the Oak Park Neighborhood Watch means watching your neighbors.

BEN *(to MOLLY)*. And Sharon is certainly dedicated to watching her neighbors.

SHARON. Widows have lots of time for looking out of windows.

WALLACE. I was OK. Maybe a little shaken up. There was no need for all that fuss with cops and paramedics.