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The Old Fart Plays

By

DEBORAH ANN PERCY
and ARNOLD JOHNSTON

Dramatic Publishing Company

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DEBORAH ANN PERCY and ARNOLD JOHNSTON

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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.

Continuum of Care

CHARACTERS

ALBERT: 60 to 80 years old; retired English professor.

LOUISE: His wife of similar age; retired middle-school principal.

ELEANOR: Their daughter; about 40 years old; a lawyer.

TOM KENT: About 40 years old; director of admissions at Colony Village Assisted Living.

TIME: From late summer or early fall through January.

PLACE: The shabby backyard of ALBERT and LOUISE's modest downtown house in a smallish Midwest city and the lounge of Colony Village Assisted Living.

“There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”

—Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*

SCENE 1

(As lights rise, we see the backyard. The only set pieces are bright yellow Adirondack chairs, side-by-side with a small table between them, facing the audience, and a planter farther down front with flowers. LOUISE, dressed in cotton slacks, a blouse and sandals, is kneeling on a pad, poking at the planter with a trowel, perhaps putting in a few small plants. She's wearing garden gloves and a floppy hat that has seen better days.)

ALBERT (*calling from off*). Louise? Louise? Where are you?

LOUISE. I'm in the backyard, dear!

(*ALBERT enters, waving a magazine in one hand. He's wearing a golf shirt, flannel pajama bottoms and slippers.*)

ALBERT. I'm almost out of shaving cream.

LOUISE. Put it on the shopping list.

ALBERT. I just brought in the mail.

LOUISE. The list is on the kitchen counter. I've left a pen right beside it.

(*Realizing he's not going to respond, she sighs and resumes poking in the planter.*)

ALBERT. There was only *The New Yorker*.

LOUISE. Seriously? That was all the mail?

ALBERT. The rest was junk. I tossed it in the recycling basket on the porch.

LOUISE. Sometimes I like to look at the junk. (*A beat.*) Did you put your shaving cream on the list?

ALBERT (*lowering himself gingerly onto his chair R*). List?

LOUISE. The shopping list. On the kitchen counter.

ALBERT. I'll do it later. (*Thumbing through The New Yorker.*) We're out of biscuit treats for Ruffy, too.

LOUISE (*softly*). Are you trying to make me cry?

ALBERT. Cry about what?

LOUISE. Do you see any trace of Ruffy anywhere? Really, Albert.

ALBERT. Oh. Right. Poor Ruffy.

(*He returns to reading the magazine.*)

LOUISE (*addressing herself as much as ALBERT*). When part of the old cedar fence blew down five years ago, it took that dog weeks to realize he was free to roam, to look for adventure—and female diversion. He'd disappear for days, and you'd wander around the neighborhood whistling for him. But he'd finally come back for my kibble and table scraps. Poor Ruffy. Now he's beyond adventures.

ALBERT (*reacting to something in the magazine*). Huh. My dearly damned former colleague T. S. Bosco has an article in this issue. (*Irritated, he slaps the magazine on an arm of the chair.*) He keeps forgetting he's T. S. Bosco, not T. S. Eliot. He's also forgotten I actually knew George Harrison.

LOUISE. *We* knew him.

ALBERT. Right. We were all friends. He and I traded ukuleles. And I never traded on our friendship to get into *The New Yorker*.

LOUISE. He and I sang a duet.

ALBERT. “Here Comes the Sun,” right?

LOUISE. Nope. “Something.”

ALBERT. “In the way she moves.” Right. Sorry. (*Conciliatory.*) How are you feeling?

LOUISE. I feel good. Better. The ache in my right side's still there.

ALBERT. At least you haven't thrown up in a few days. You and Princess Di.

LOUISE. But *I'm* not having an affair with an old lover.

ALBERT. Right.

LOUISE. I throw up. You forget. We're quite a pair.

ALBERT. Right.

(He falls silent, lets the magazine slip to the ground.)

LOUISE. Albert? Albert? (*Concerned, she rises with some effort, moves to him, drops the garden gloves and touches his shoulder.*) Dear heart.

ALBERT. I'm not dead yet. (*He looks up at her.*) I woke up in the night and didn't know where I was. I didn't know who the old lady was sleeping next to me.

LOUISE (*touches his cheek*). Sweetheart.

ALBERT. George was my friend. You and Olivia would laugh and laugh. And yet . . . (*With a start.*) It was you, wasn't it? In bed? (*He reaches up and touches her hair.*) It was you, your silver hair? You who baked scones and laughed with Olivia.

(She kisses the top of his head, then picks up the magazine and gives it to him. She crosses back to the planter and carefully kneels again.)

LOUISE. So. T. S.' article?

ALBERT (*glancing at the magazine*). Old bloviator. Some good lines in it, but I suspect his wife wrote them.

LOUISE. George's wife?

ALBERT. Not Olivia. T. S.' wife. Janet. Tall, thin somber woman. (*A beat.*) Damn it, Louise.

LOUISE. I'm sorry. You deserve to be published everywhere. And you and George *were* real mates those last years. *His* last years.

ALBERT. I will add my—face stuff—to your shopping list. And the string you use to clean your teeth?

LOUISE. Dental floss.

ALBERT. That's it. I do deserve to be published everywhere, instead of *The Sour Grapes Review* in Northern Michigan. Or the literary journal of Cherry Pit Junior College.

(*LOUISE resumes work at the planter.*)

ALBERT (*cont'd*). What's for dinner? Should we go out? The new Belgian place? I'll call and make a reservation. (*Back to his grievance.*) Browning and His Teeny-Tiny Circle of Friends.

LOUISE. Come on, Alberto. You have an outstanding publications record.

ALBERT. There you go with that Alberto business. I hate Alberto.

LOUISE. You hate my calling you Alberto? Since when?

ALBERT. It's demeaning. Belittling. (*A beat.*) What shall we do about dinner? Shall I take you out?

LOUISE. Sweetheart. You know Eleanor's coming. She's driving us over to see—

ALBERT (*realizing*). That place.

LOUISE. Yes, dear. That place.

ALBERT. Well, if we have that before us, let's at least have a drink to fortify ourselves for the ordeal. We haven't had one yet today, have we?

LOUISE. No, dear. I made a shakerful before coming out here, but I thought we might wait until after our excursion with Eleanor. You know how she is.

ALBERT. To hell with that. I want my—what do you call them? (*He waves the magazine.*) New Yorkers?

LOUISE. Manhattans, dear. Made with Maker's Mark—your favorite.

ALBERT. Right. I'll get them. Where did you say they were?

LOUISE. In the fridge. In the metal shaker. You can pour them in there and bring them out in glasses.

ALBERT. Right.

(He drops the magazine on the table and levers himself out of the chair with some effort.)

LOUISE. I saw a gadget on Facebook designed to help old farts get up out of chairs like these.

ALBERT. Steam shovel? Forklift?

LOUISE. A blue plastic thing with handles on both ends. One person uses it to pull the other one up. Of course, someone has to be already off their butt and on their feet to make it work.

ALBERT. Or remember where somebody left it lying around.

LOUISE. That, too. *(A beat.)* We could get different chairs. Something easier for our elderly butts to get in and out of.

ALBERT. I like the Adirondacks. You're not going to fall out of them.

LOUISE. You can certainly fall into them. *(Seeing he seems at a loss.)* Drinks?

ALBERT *(a beat)*. Here I go. *(Looking around.)* The yard looks like hell. All those fallen Granny ... Granny ...

LOUISE. Smiths.

ALBERT. Right. Smiths. Rotting everywhere. Place smells like applejack.

(Without waiting for a reply, he exits.)

LOUISE *(as if answering him)*. Forty years ago, this garden was a showplace. We'd entertain colleagues out here, especially when you were department chair. We'd have college boys—and girls—rake the dead leaves out of the flower beds, cut back the daffodils when they were blown, mow and water the grass. And collect the fallen apples. Now the bees, when there are any, get drunk on the fermenting fruit. *(A beat.)* I like it wild. Except for my planter.

(She resumes tinkering with the flowers. ALBERT re-enters, carrying two juice glasses full of brown liquid.)

ALBERT. Your drink, madam. *(He sets the drinks on the table, then moves to her.)* Up you come.

(He helps her to rise and walks her to her chair. They both sit.)

LOUISE. You didn't use Manhattan glasses.

ALBERT. I didn't want to spill any.

LOUISE. And no cherries.

ALBERT. I had enough trouble finding the—what do you call it? *(Motioning with his hand.)* The rattler.

LOUISE. Shaker.

ALBERT. Right.

LOUISE *(raising her glass)*. To you, sweetheart.

ALBERT *(raising his)*. To you, love.

(They sip their drinks. He sets his glass back on the table and rises with effort.)

ALBERT *(cont'd)*. I'll get the cherries.

LOUISE. They're in a little jar in the refrigerator door.

ALBERT. Right. *(He starts off.)*

ELEANOR *(from off)*. Mother? Daddy?

(ALBERT turns on a dime and resumes his seat.)

LOUISE. She's arrived. *(Calling off.)* We're out back, dear!

ALBERT. Did we know she was coming?

LOUISE. We did. *(A beat.)* Let me do the talking. *(Realizing he's not listening.)* Albert, I mean this. For once, let me talk. This is important.

(ELEANOR bursts through the screen door, letting it bang behind her. She's in her forties, attractive, slender and taller than her parents. She's wearing a professional-looking suit accessorized with jewelry.)

ELEANOR *(looking around)*. What a mess this yard is. All those Granny Smiths rotting on the ground. What's happened to the boys you hire to keep this place looking respectable?

ALBERT. Went to college, got married. Had a daughter.

(He takes a sip of his drink, ignoring LOUISE's warning look.)

ELEANOR. You're not ready. Don't tell me you forgot, too, Mother.

ALBERT. Your mother? Forget?

LOUISE *(raising a warning finger at him)*. Of course we didn't. *(A beat.)* I see you're wearing your grandmother's garnet necklace. It looks very nice.

ELEANOR. Appropriate to the occasion. *(Registering ALBERT's clothing.)* You can't go dressed like that. And you're drinking.

LOUISE. We do plan to drink Manhattans when we're installed there. This isn't a Methodist place we're looking at, is it?

ALBERT. And recycle. We'll be able to do that, too. Right?

ELEANOR. Please, Mother. Daddy. Freshen up a bit. Are those pajama pants you're wearing? And slippers?

LOUISE. Flannel pants, dear. I believe they expect us at three.

ALBERT. I'll strain out the ice. Put the ... drinks ... in the fridge.

(He rocks back and forth until he can rise from the chair. Then he holds out a hand and helps LOUISE to her feet.)

ELEANOR. Dear God. What have you done to those chairs?
Daddy, did you pick out that hideous color?

(The lights snap to black.)

SCENE 2

(As the lights rise, we see the lounge of Colony Village Assisted Living, which may have a chair and table or two. LOUISE, ALBERT and ELEANOR are standing, obviously waiting. ELEANOR is glancing at a brochure. ALBERT is still wearing his golf shirt, but has now opted for cargo pants and loafers.)

LOUISE. I thought this guy—

ALBERT. Clark Kent?

ELEANOR. Tom Kent. He's the director of admissions.

ALBERT. So where is he? Changing costumes in a phone booth?

ELEANOR. He'll be here shortly. I'm sure he's busy.

ALBERT. Right.

LOUISE. I thought Mr. Kent was showing us their ...
(Reading from the brochure.) "signature semi-detached homes at the beginning of their continuum of care."

ALBERT. This place looks more like a nineteen-seventies campus dorm.

ELEANOR. He's just meeting us here. You'll have to pass a few tests to qualify for an individual home.

ALBERT. Tests?

ELEANOR. To see if you're still capable of living on your own.

ALBERT *(voice rising)*. Living on our own?

LOUISE *(touching his arm)*. Albert, dear. They'll probably check our blood pressure.

ALBERT (*glaring at ELEANOR*). You mean tests like “person, woman, man, camera, TV”? That kind of test?

(*LOUISE takes a firmer grip on his arm. He shakes off her hand just as TOM KENT enters. He looks like ELEANOR’s professional counterpart—attractive, wearing an impeccable suit, a lavender shirt with a complementary tie, and expensive shoes.*)

TOM KENT (*with a slight bow*). Welcome to Colony Village.

I see you have a brochure. Eleanor thought we might start here before looking at more independent options.

ALBERT (*not a question*). Did she.

LOUISE (*to ELEANOR*). Did you, dear?

ELEANOR. Everything here is very nice.

TOM KENT (*undaunted*). There are several levels of care available in this specific module. Also exercise facilities. Music rooms with regular piano tuning. And a dining room with a two-star chef. There’s a fully staffed pharmacy. Even guest rooms you can rent to accommodate out-of-town visitors.

LOUISE. All for the same four hundred thousand buy-in price as the independent homes? Plus the additional thirty-five hundred a month?

TOM KENT. We do provide a continuum of care. (*Trying for sociability.*) Eleanor tells me you taught at the university, Mr. Ingram.

ALBERT. Doctor. Ph.D. Modern literature.

TOM KENT. Of course. *Dr.* Ingram. Excuse me.

ALBERT. Though more like out-of-date literature these days.

Now that everybody hates Hemingway.

TOM KENT. Time does march on.

ALBERT. Tell me about it.

TOM KENT. And you, Mrs. Ingram. You were a middle-school principal?

LOUISE. That's right. Master's degree. No doctorate.

TOM KENT. A challenging job. I bet you were glad to retire.

LOUISE. Nope. It was the job I was born for. I loved those children. They have everything ahead of them. You try to nurture their best impulses, prepare them for an independent life.

ALBERT. Then she grows up and becomes a lawyer. No longer has any impulses.

ELEANOR. Daddy.

TOM KENT (*to ELEANOR*). And you, Ms. Ingram. A Doctor of Jurisprudence?

ALBERT. We're a well-educated family.

LOUISE (*heading this off*). And would we be assured we could stay together?

ELEANOR. Mother.

ALBERT. What?

TOM KENT. We do our best to be accommodating and consistent with changing circumstances. (*A beat.*) You may even find former neighbors, friends and colleagues here at Colony Village.

LOUISE. And what happens if we run out of money?

ELEANOR. Mother, please. I've read the contract. You'll be fine. (*To KENT.*) They're not going to run out of money, I can assure you.

TOM KENT. Of course. That's all covered in the application process. Most folks in your age-related situation have significant equity in their homes. Other properties.

ALBERT. And we drink. In our significantly equitable property. The ... New York drink.

LOUISE. Manhattans. Two every day. We usually wait till the sun crosses the yardarm.

ALBERT. But not always.

TOM KENT (*conciliatory*). Of course you may drink alcohol if you choose. As long as it's not contraindicated by your medications. (*A beat.*) And now, let me show you one of our very pleasant apartments. I'm sure you'll be impressed.

ELEANOR. I'm sure they will.

(TOM KENT moves off, trailed by the other three, as the lights snap to black.)

SCENE 3

(The lights rise, revealing the backyard looking just as it did before. ELEANOR, ALBERT and LOUISE are standing between the planter and the Adirondack chairs. The juice glasses of Manhattans, this time with a couple of cherries in them, are on the table along with the shaker.)

ELEANOR. I thought that went pretty well, all things considered.

LOUISE. You mean considering how well your father hit it off with Tom Hiddleston.

ELEANOR. Kent.

LOUISE. I know that. I just meant he looks like the British actor. He sure doesn't sound like him, though.

ELEANOR. I guess he does look a bit like Tom Hiddleston, now that you mention it.

LOUISE. Has he asked you out? I saw the way he was sizing you up. Doctor of Jurisprudence. You'd be a good catch, even for a director of admissions.

ELEANOR. Don't be ridiculous, Mother. (*A beat.*) In any case, I'm sure Mr. Kent and everyone else at Colony Village will love Daddy.

ALBERT. Right. That's always my goal. To be loved by everyone.

(*He begins to hum George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord," or something similar.*)

ELEANOR. So. Before you get back to your Manhattans.

(*She takes out a sheaf of papers.*) Are we ready to sign?

ALBERT (*stops humming*). No, we're not.

LOUISE. Just leave the papers. We'll call you.

ELEANOR. I don't see why—

ALBERT. "Person, woman, man, camera, TV."

ELEANOR. What?

ALBERT. We're *compos mentis*. At least most of the time.

ELEANOR. I just want what's best for both of you. I want you to be safe.

LOUISE. Eleanor, our furniture would never fit inside that tiny space. Albert's books. We have hundred-year-old hardwood floors, not linoleum.

ELEANOR. Luxury vinyl tile.

ALBERT. Luxury linoleum.

LOUISE. Our artwork—paintings by friends, our African masks, metal pieces.

ELEANOR. We can work it out.

LOUISE. Can we?

ALBERT. So said John, Paul, George and Ringo. But they couldn't. George was eloquent on the subject.

LOUISE. Could we put our yellow chairs in that cement courtyard?

ELEANOR. Mother, I worry about you here.

(They all look at one another for a few beats.)

LOUISE. We'll call you.

ELEANOR. You're my parents. I love you.

LOUISE. We know that, dear.

(Another brief silence.)

ELEANOR. Well. I'll leave you to it. *(She sets the papers on the table.)* Don't take too long. Colony Village has lots of applicants.

(Getting no response, she gives each of them a peck on the cheek and starts off.)

LOUISE. Goodbye, dear.

ALBERT. So long, kid.

ELEANOR *(glancing back)*. I'll wait for your call.

(She exits.)

ALBERT. What a horror. *(He lowers himself into his chair.)* I thought we were looking at a home. In a house. Not a grim two-room dormitory apartment with an elevated toilet seat in the bathroom.

LOUISE *(sitting, too)*. We're evolving a plan, dear. You need to let me do the talking. You lose your temper.

ALBERT. Rightfully so.

LOUISE. Rightfully so.

(She hands him his glass and picks up her own.)

ALBERT. I've talked all my life. I made my living talking to students.

LOUISE. I would've advised you against saying you'd rather plunge off the bridge of San Luis Rey than live in one of those apartments.

ALBERT. Thornton Wilder. Someone else no one teaches anymore. *(A beat.)* This Clark Kent fellow. He looks like someone we know.

LOUISE. Tom Hiddleston, the English actor. *Henry the Fifth*. One of the Plantagenets. The Band of Brothers speech. "We happy few."

ALBERT. I'm familiar. Married a French girl. Died young. Hiddleston?

LOUISE. Right. Though now, like all the other movie stars, he's making more money by playing a comic book character.

ALBERT. This guy today sure didn't sound like any Brit. Whiny and Midwestern. And everything he said was awful. *(Doing his version of a whiny Midwestern accent.)* "That's right, folks. We'll take care of it. We've thought of everything."

(He drains his glass and pops a cherry in his mouth.)

LOUISE. It was awful. Telling us our *continuums of care* may take us on different paths. But we'd still be free to visit each other.

(She finishes her own drink and eats one of her cherries.)

ALBERT. Not on your life. Not on his, either. I intend to keep on sleeping in my own bed with that strange old woman.

LOUISE *(amused)*. I'm glad to hear it.

ALBERT. How about another of our ... damn it. Manhassetts?

LOUISE. Manhattans.

ALBERT. Right. Manhattans.

LOUISE. Yes, indeed. *(She pours each of them another drink and raises her glass.)* To you, my love.

ALBERT *(raising his own glass)*. And you, sweetheart.

(They sip their drinks as the lights fade to black.)

SCENE 4

(As the lights rise, LOUISE and ALBERT enter the backyard. It is now January, and there's a full moon shining on them from downstage. A phalanx of daffodil spears is poking out of the planter. LOUISE is carrying a tray with Manhattans and a shaker, wearing sweatpants and a pink sweater with big buttons. ALBERT is wearing his pajama bottoms and slippers with a tweed cloth cap, a scarf, mittens and a zippered parka. LOUISE sets the tray on the table, then takes a dust cloth from her sweater pocket and wipes off the Adirondack chairs while ALBERT waits.)

LOUISE. See? It's not bad out here. A classic January thaw.

ALBERT. Right.

LOUISE. Don't crab. Sit. You won't get cold the way you're bundled up.

ALBERT. I'm always cold. I notice you have that ugly sweater on.

LOUISE. My Christmas gift from Eleanor. I thought wearing it in the dying light was appropriate. I wonder what made her think I'd want to wear it out in the world.

ALBERT. As much as we get out in the world these days. Are we raging against the light? Or the dying?