

NEARLY DEPARTED

WRITER: CERISE DE GELDER

E-MAIL: cerisedegelder@live.com.au

CHARACTERS:

PRIEST - *The dying woman's parish priest.*

FRAN - *Woman, forties, daughter of dying woman.*

DR PICK - *Doctor of dying woman.*

LENNY - *Man, forties, son of dying woman.*

SETTING:

The home of the dying woman.

(The priest enters solemnly, carrying a bible. He addresses the audience.)

PRIEST: God was calling her. That's what she told me. Seventy-eight years old, three dead husbands, two adult children, one blind cat, and a mind as sharp as the day she graduated high school. But her body...well, sadly...

(Dr Pick enters. He addresses the priest.)

DR PICK: Her heart is weak, her limbs riddled with arthritis, the diabetes is taking its toll. I'm afraid she's not long for this world, Father.

PRIEST: But looking forward to the next, thank the Lord. She's been a devoted Christian all her life, Doctor Pick. Her faith will give her courage.

(The doctor starts to exit, as Fran enters.)

FRAN: Doctor Pick. Thank you so much for coming...for looking after her so well all these years.

DR PICK: I've become very close to your mother, Fran. I'll be greatly saddened by her passing.

FRAN: Not many doctors would do house calls every day.

DR PICK: I want to make her as comfortable as possible in her last hours.

FRAN: She's very lucky to have such a dedicated physician.

DR PICK: And such a devoted daughter. I'll see you tomorrow. Let me know if...

FRAN: Of course.

(Dr Pick exits.)

PRIEST: How are you holding up, Fran?

FRAN: I'm fine, Father. I just wish we had more time together. *(She pulls out a handkerchief and dabs at her tears.)*

PRIEST: You two are very close.

FRAN: She's my best friend.

PRIEST: Perhaps you'd like to join me in a prayer...?

FRAN: Thank you, Father but...I really should change her bedclothes.

PRIEST: Of course.

(Fran exits. The priest appears to be praying, then suddenly looks up at the audience.)

Two weeks later and she's still holding on. God's still calling her, she says, but she just can't bring herself to answer. I gently suggest that perhaps she needs to let go of this life and seek a better one. We say a prayer for courage...

(Lenny enters.)

LENNY: Father.

PRIEST: Lenny. Have you made your peace with your mother?

LENNY: I would if it wasn't for that bitch.

PRIEST: Which bitch? I mean, who are you referring to, my son?

LENNY: Fran! She won't let me in the door. Says Mum doesn't want to see me.

PRIEST: How long have you been away? Ten years?

LENNY: Fifteen.

PRIEST: Fifteen years without a word. Your mother needs time to find forgiveness in her heart.

LENNY: Yeah, but that's one thing we don't have, isn't it. I mean, the doc says she's at death's door.

PRIEST: She's gravely ill, yes.

LENNY: Maybe you could put in a good word for me. Y'know...the prodigal son and all that shit...I mean...stuff.

(Fran enters.)

PRIEST: I can talk to her but...she's been hurt rather badly.

FRAN: You can say that again.

LENNY: Okay, so I borrowed some money...

FRAN: Ten thousand, never paid back.

LENNY: And I got into some trouble...

FRAN: Armed robbery, drug bust, jail time...

LENNY: But I never stopped thinking about her.

FRAN: Never called, never phoned, never sent a birthday card...

LENNY: I needed some space!

FRAN: And now you need some cash.

PRIEST: Fran...

LENNY: You think I'm here just for that?

PRIEST: Lenny...

FRAN: Fifteen years and *now* you turn up when she's about to die. Yeah, Lenny, I think you're here just for that.

PRIEST: Fran...

LENNY: Is she?

FRAN: Is she what?

LENNY: About to die?

FRAN: You're a prick!

PRIEST: Fran!

LENNY: Cos you told me she was just about to die two weeks ago and here we all are...still alive!

PRIEST: Lenny!

FRAN: She's suffering. *I'm* suffering. But all you can think of is how soon you can have your gambling debts paid off.

PRIEST: Fran...

LENNY: I don't have gambling debts, smartarse.

PRIEST: Lenny...

LENNY: But there's a really nasty dealer that might also be interested in her exact date of departure.

PRIEST: Lenny!

FRAN: You bastard!

PRIEST: Fran!

FRAN: }
LENNY: } (*Angrily to the priest*)WHAT?

(Finally given the chance to speak, the priest is lost for words. Lenny and Fran storm off in opposite directions. The priest resumes his prayers for a moment, then looks up.)

PRIEST: *(To audience)* Four weeks and still death evades her. She says God is still calling her but his voice is very distant...

(Fran enters.)

I say maybe she should turn her hearing aid up a little...just a suggestion.

FRAN: Father?

PRIEST: Yes, Fran.

FRAN: Who are you talking to?

(The priest looks flustered, then points skyward.)

Oh. Are you begging Him to take her?

PRIEST: That's not really my role...

FRAN: Because *I* have been.

PRIEST: Fran!

FRAN: I'm sorry, Father, but I can't take it much longer. I mean I know she's sick but for God's sake does she have to be such a crabby old bitch?

PRIEST: Now, Fran...

(Doctor Pick enters. Fran addresses him hopefully.)

FRAN: So?

DR PICK: So...

FRAN: Is she likely to fall off the perch anytime soon?

PRIEST: Fran!

DR PICK: Ah...I really couldn't say for certain.

FRAN: C'mon, doc. You said four weeks ago that she wasn't long for this world.

DR PICK: One can't predict these things. She's been very ill and in pain/...

FRAN: But she's not, is she. You keep injecting her with morphine every day. Why would she want to leave? She's as high as a kite half the time...

PRIEST: Fran...

DR PICK: And what would you have me do? Leave her to suffer?

PRIEST: Dr Pick...

FRAN: Couldn't you give her a half dose or something? Maybe if she was suffering more she'd be more motivated to pack it in.

PRIEST: Fran!

DR PICK: Look, I'm not enjoying this anymore than you. You think I like running over here every day while I have patients desperate for appointments?

PRIEST: Dr Pick...

FRAN: So don't come so often.

PRIEST: Fran...

DR PICK: I have a duty of care to administer painkillers...

PRIEST: Dr Pick...

FRAN: Well okay, give her the whole week's dose in one go.

PRIEST: Fran...

DR PICK: Are you mad? That would kill her!

PRIEST: Dr Pick...

FRAN: So?

PRIEST: Fran!

FRAN: }
DR PICK: } (*Angrily, to Priest*) WHAT?

(*Lenny enters.*)

LENNY: Hey, can you keep it down out here. I'm trying to read to Mum.

FRAN: Good for you! Keep practicing...one day you'll master it.

LENNY: We're in the middle of *Wuthering Heights*...

DR PICK: Oh wonderful! I loved that book when I was growing up.

PRIEST: (*To Lenny*) You two seem to be getting on well these days.

DR PICK: I think Emily was the best of the Brontes, though some would disagree...

LENNY: She forgave me, Father. The woman is an angel.

FRAN: Not yet, she isn't. You have to be dead first.

DR PICK: It was her only novel, of course, but she wrote such wonderful poetry...

LENNY: (*Visibly upset.*) God, don't say that! I can't bear the thought of losing her now that I've found her again.

PRIEST: We'll all miss her, Lenny, but she'll be at peace.

DR PICK: Although Charlotte had a lovely turn of phrase too...

PRIEST: Who?

DR PICK: Charlotte.

FRAN: Who's Charlotte?

DR PICK: She's one of the... Oh, never mind. (*He exits.*) Let me know if the old girl meets her maker.

FRAN: Don't hold your breath.

LENNY: I'd better get back... Heathcliff's wandering the moors.

(*He exits.*)

FRAN: Oh Father, I'm a terrible daughter.

PRIEST: (*Putting his arm around her shoulders.*) You're a wonderful daughter, Fran. Don't ever feel that you've let her down in any way.

FRAN: (*Gazing up into his eyes*) Thank God you're here, Father. I don't know who I would have turned to...

PRIEST: Harry.

FRAN: Who's Harry?

PRIEST: No, I mean me... Harry's me... I'm Harry. Call me Harry... Fran...

(*They look like they're going to kiss, then Fran exits quickly.*)

PRIEST: (*To audience*) Eight weeks, two days and ten hours. The old crone lingers on. Unbelievable! She says she can still hear the voice of God but Lenny's rendition of *Great Expectations* is far more interesting. I say, "For Chrissake, pay attention, woman! You can't ignore the word of God!"

(*Fran enters.*)

FRAN: I don't believe this! He won't let me see her!

(*Lenny enters.*)

- LENNY: You think I'm going to let you near her after the pillow incident?
- FRAN: I told you, I tripped over the bedside table with a pillow in my hands. I couldn't help it if I landed on Mum's face and couldn't get up again! You came in at a bad moment, that's all.
- PRIEST: It was an accident, Lenny. Could have happened to anyone.
- LENNY: And you! With your rosary beads...
- PRIEST: She asked me to put them around her neck. Surely you can understand that in the fervour of intense prayer ones hands can take on a life of their own.
- LENNY: She was blue in the face!
- PRIEST: My fingers seized up in the Hail Marys...it happens sometimes.
- LENNY: Murderers! You go near her again and I'm calling the cops.
- (Dr Pick enters wearily)*
- How is she, doc?
- DR PICK: *(Disappointed)* Still alive.
- (The priest and Fran sigh loudly.)*
- LENNY: *(Hugging the doctor)* It's a miracle! Praise the Lord!
- (Lenny exits. Dr Pick slips some papers to Fran.)*
- DR PICK: Here's some information on euthanasia...in case you're interested.
- (He exits.)*
- FRAN: She's never going to die. She'll just go on and on like one of those Russian peasants until she's a hundred and twenty and I'm in a nursing home and we'll never be together...
- PRIEST: *(Embracing her)* She's not immortal, Fran.
- FRAN: Really? Prove it.
- PRIEST: Is it so important that we wait? I'm not ashamed to confess my love for you.

FRAN: Are you kidding? If I told her I was shagging her parish priest the shock would be enough to kill her!

(They brighten, both arriving at the same idea simultaneously.)

PRIEST: I'll distract Lenny, you talk to your mother.

FRAN: I'm on it!

(They high-five each other and exit gleefully. The priest re-enters looking despondent.)

PRIEST: Three years, twelve weeks, four days, five hours and *(checking his watch)* ten minutes...she is without doubt the most stubborn woman I've ever encountered. Fran and I gave up waiting and eloped. We married on a cruise ship...had a wonderful honeymoon in Vanuatu...until she picked up a coral infection and fell in love with the ship's nurse. Dr Pick retired and became a romance novelist. Lenny had to pay his debts somehow so he got a job as a broadcaster on 3RP radio for the blind.

(Pause)

And me? Well, someone's got to look after the old girl and since I seem to have found myself at a loose end...

VOICE FROM

OFF STAGE: Harry! Are you there, Harry? My pan needs changing!

PRIEST: I guess it's me...

(With an evil look in his eye he exits.)

...for now.

END