

PASSAGE

a ten-minute play in two scenes
by

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Synopsis

HELEN has been moved to a different wing into a tiny room in her retirement home. Something strange is happening. She hears voices emanating from the closet and stops eating. LILLY, her daughter, can't get any answers from the staff. She has to attend a wedding out of town. When she returns, she finds that her mother has met with a gruesome fate.

Characters in order of appearance

NURSE	any age, gender or ethnicity
HELEN	a woman in her seventies with a severe limp
LILLY	her middle-aged daughter
ATTENDANT	any age, gender or ethnicity

ATTENDANT and **NURSE** may be played by the same actor, as long as they are portrayed as two distinctly different people.

Time: A Friday afternoon in early March 2020, the following Tuesday

Place: a retirement home in the suburbs.

There is a minimum of furniture. Downstage right a counter is set up which serves as a sort of command station. It has a cold, streamlined look and contains only electronic equipment. The main area is Helen's room. It contains two chairs, a walker, a small table with a radio, a wastebasket; a bed is indicated behind a scrim or curtain. A window upstage left looks out on a dying tree. A door to the bathroom is upstage right, and a functional closet door is upstage center. Lights and sound are important elements.

PASSAGE

Scene 1

AT RISE it is early afternoon, a sunny Spring day. **HELEN**, dressed in a flowing, light-colored nightgown with a long, grey, cardigan over it, sits near the window. The **NURSE** hands her water in a paper cup.

NURSE

Take it. Take it!

(grabs her arm)

Open your mouth!

HELEN

I don't want it. It makes me dizzy. - I don't need it.

NURSE

Open your mouth.

(forces a pill in her mouth)

Down the hatch. There you go. - What is this smell?

(tries to open the window)

Right, they're nailed shut in this wing.

(checks the waste basket)

NURSE

Disgusting! How many times have I told you, if you don't want to eat something you leave it on your plate. If you want to starve yourself that's your funeral – save us a lot of trouble - but you do not put food in the wastebasket. That does it. No more meals in your room. You're perfectly capable of walking to the dining room *and* the lounge, where you can listen to the radio. I'm confiscating the radio.

She exits with the wastebasket and the radio.

HELEN sits motionless by the window with her eyes closed. An eerie light emanates from under the closet door. We hear soft music of an earlier era, maybe *Solitaire*. **HELEN** listens enthralled, swaying in her chair. She sings and hums along.

The light switches to the desk in the hall. **LILLY**, Helen's daughter, enters. She is an overworked teacher at the local school and the mother of three girls.

LILLY

Hi! What a beautiful day. Spring is in the air. How is it going? - How is she doing?

ATTENDANT

Excuse me, you are?

LILLY

Oh, sorry. I'm here to see Helen. She was moved from your other building last week. I'm her daughter, Lilly. We met yesterday.

ATTENDANT

Down the hall, the last door on the left.

LILLY

I know, number 309. I still don't know why she was moved. She loved her old room.

ATTENDANT

You'll have to take that up with Dr. Bannon in Administration.

LILLY

I've tried, believe me, I've tried. He is never available. Is she eating now?

ATTENDANT

You'll have to talk to the nurse about that.

The lights shift to Helen's room as LILLY enters.
Meanwhile HELEN has limped into the closet.
LILLY drops her bag and coat on the chair and goes
back to the desk.

LILLY

She's not in her room.

ATTENDANT

Did you check the bathroom?

LILLY reenters as HELEN comes out of the closet.

LILLY

Oh heavens, there you are. What are you doing in the closet?

HELEN

I want to be sure I can find the door. I don't see it. I might need a key. Better ask for the key in case it's locked.

LILLY

Locked? What's locked? What door? What are you talking about? Hi Mom.

(hugs her)

How are you feeling? I brought your blue robe and some lemon cookies. Your favorites! I'm sorry I can only stay a few minutes. Austin says hi. He won't see you this Sunday, remember? We're all going to Olivia's wedding. Remember? We'll get back late Monday. I'll see you Tuesday morning, God willing; they're talking about restricting visitors to this building.

HELEN

What happened to the door? I couldn't find it. I might need a key, and she took my radio.

LILLY

Key? What key?

HELEN indicates the closet.

LILLY

It's not locked. See!

LILLY hangs the robe inside and closes the door. Music and subdued voices are coming from the closet, laughter, pinging of glasses, scraping of chairs as from a gathering. Only HELEN can hear it.

LILLY

You were just in there. What were you doing in there? It's tiny. The closet is tiny. Nothing is locked here. Here, I brought you lemon cookies. Austin sends his love. Sorry, I can't stay. I'll have to pick up the girls, get them ready for the trip. It's always such a production. They want to take umpteen toys. Evie won't go anywhere without her piggy and ...

HELEN

You hear? They're getting started. Lilly, make sure the door is not locked before you go. Get a key from the nurse before you go. They're all coming. Elsie is chairing. Draining the swamp. I heard it on the radio. Draining the swamp! It's starting. It'll be such fun.

LILLY

What is starting? Oh Mom, you're not making sense. What do you mean Elsie? Elsie has been dead for a long, long time now, you know that.

(HELEN keeps smiling at her)

They took your radio? Have you been playing it too loud? Is that why they took it? I'll talk to them. I'll get it back for you, don't you worry. And I'll get you back into your old room. They had no right. Nobody even informed us. I hate this building. There is something, I don't know, something not right about it.

HELEN

I don't need it now. I don't need the radio. They're all coming. My Elsie. Don't you hear them?

LILLY

Hear? Hear what?

HELEN

In there. In the room through the door in there.

She limps to the walker, and struggles to open the closet door. The sounds and light stop.

LILLY

For heaven's sake. You can't get in there with your walker.

She struggles with HELEN to get her back into the chair.

HELEN

Don't you hear it?

LILLY

Hear what? Mom, you must have been dreaming.

HELEN

I'm awake. How can I be dreaming?

LILLY

You probably nodded off and didn't realize it.

HELEN

I was not sleeping.

LILLY

Alright, you were daydreaming, Mom, daydreaming. That's fine. That's good. Dream all you want. Dreams are good. It's a way for our brains to sort things out, come to term with things. I know it was a big shock when Elsie died so unexpectedly. But it's a long time ago.

HELEN

How could she die before me? She was perfect.

LILLY

She was not perfect. Nobody is perfect. She could be very bossy.

HELEN

She took care of all of us. I didn't have to think. My bossy, perfect sister.

LILLY

Here, give me a hug. I'm so sorry I have to run. I'll try to get your radio back. OK? I love you.

(She exits)

HELEN

(calling after her)

Don't forget the key.

LILLY stops at the nurse's station. The Attendant is not there. She calls for her/him a few times, then exits.

Some time later. It is getting dark. HELEN is sitting by the window wearing the blue robe. She is humming and mumbling to herself.

HELEN

Carnage alright. Confiscated my radio. So mean. Elsie, I missed you. I missed you every day. I gave your coat away. Shame on me. How could I? Can you forgive me? The other one too, the one with the fox trim that made it sway so prettily. Your first one, lamb with fox trim, your favorite. I gave it to the super's ugly wife because I didn't want to wear fur, because of the animals, you know. So stupid of me. They were already dead. And I wish I hadn't told you that I got that photo frame gratis. Such sadness in your eyes that Christmas. Why do I do these things? All my life. Stupid, stupid, stupid. That rich bitch wouldn't give me back the hammock. Of course, he had no right to sell it to her. It was mine. You brought it to me all the way from Brazil in that heavy leather bag. Lugged it all the way from Brazil. A hammock like lace. The cat swung in it. My Moody swung in it. She would lie in it and I'd rock her. Alright, okay, we'll forget it. Water under the bridge. Right? I'm so glad you're here. I missed you so, and here you are chairing the meeting.

HELEN leans back in her chair, eyes closed. After a while she gets up and walks, almost dances, gracefully to the closet without limping. When she opens the door the music and party sounds swell. She draws the door shut behind her.

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Scene 2

Tuesday morning, a grey rainy day. LILLY is at the nurses station.

LILLY

... 309! Helen. She is not in there.

ATTENDANT

Who did you say you are?

LILLY

Oh for God sakes, I'm Helen's daughter. Where is she? Did they move her back into her old room? I've been asking for her to be moved back into her old building. I was just over there, and they wouldn't even let me into the building.

ATTENDANT

You don't understand.

LILLY

Why don't you explain it to me.

ATTENDANT

They're on a different schedule. Different visiting hours. She was category four, housed in a category three building. We had to move her. She can't go back there. If you ask me, she was ripe for five, for the final ...

(she stops short)

LILLY

Final what? What are you talking about?

ATTENDANT

Ready for – never mind.

LILLY

The final what? What are you talking about?

ATTENDANT

What I was saying is that finally the best solution is to have the same category of patients in the same building. Five is for our most vulnerable patients, who need the most attention. Dr. Bannon reorganized Never mind. This is no concern of yours.

LILLY

Look, I just want to see her. Do you mind?

ATTENDANT

For your information, I saw her walk right by here. She was wearing a blue robe. She smiled at me. And she was barely limping. She was practically floating. There was no reason to check on her. You can talk to the Nurse. She will tell you the same thing. Our surveillance is state of the art. Talk to the nurse. I'm sure any number of people saw her sitting in the game room.

LILLY

I don't want to talk to the nurse. I want to see my mother. Now! I want to see her now!

ATTENDANT

I'm not sure that's possible.

LILLY

What do you mean you're not sure?

ATTENDANT

I'm not authorized to

LILLY

Who's in charge here? Get me the person in charge. Now! Who is in charge?

ATTENDANT

Uh, that would be Ms. Conway, but I doubt she is available. She is very busy. I'm not sure she is even on the premises. As a matter of fact, I don't think she ...

LILLY

I suggest you go find her right now, and tell her she can talk to me now, or she can talk to my lawyer tomorrow. This is unbelievable. First you move her without informing us. Now I can't see her?

ATTENDANT

Please keep your voice down. There is no need to yell. I'll, uh, I'll ... Let's see if Miss Conway is in the building.

(looks at the screen, changes her mind)

I'll be right back.

(she exits)

LILLY

(dials Austin)

Hi..... I don't know. I haven't seen her yet She is not in her room.Yes, I thought of that. I went to check her old room but they wouldn't even let me in the building..... different visiting hours or something I'm waiting to speak to Ms.

Conway. Remember her? The impertinent blond. That's the one Oh, I won't.
 .. I'm not leaving until they put her back into her old room.

(NURSE enters)

I have to go. The Nurse is coming

The NURSE steps behind the counter where she busies herself on the computer. LILLY moves right up close to her and stares at her.

NURSE

Somebody has spoken with you?

LILLY

I'm waiting to see her.

NURSE

Now?

(LILLY keeps nodding silently)

Are you sure you want to see her now?

LILLY

Yes.

NURSE

Personally, I wouldn't recommend it. Why don't you wait until they've had a chance to

LILLY

Now, I want to see her now.

NURSE

If you're sure.

LILLY

She is my mother.

NURSE

Yes, of course. Of course, if you're sure. Let me pull up the report.

Staring into the computer she rattles on looking at
 Lilly only now and then.

They told you about the bruise, right? Just so you're prepared. You know the cause hasn't been determined yet. When the cleaning staff found her, she was all entangled in this shawl with this terrible bruise on her forehead. They're not sure if it's from the fall. Not very likely if you ask me with the closet being so narrow and all the clothes in there.

She may have deliberately banged her head against the wall. Or she may have suffocated. We may never know for sure, now that Dr. Bannon has suspended all autopsies. But I assure you there must be a mistake. She cannot have been lying in there for two days. Absolutely not. I saw her myself yesterday, I think.

(LILLY gasps)

I hope I didn't speak out of turn. Will you excuse me for a moment?

The NURSE leaves. The lights stay on LILLY for a moment then black out.

end of play