

DEFROSTING POPSICLES

A PLAY BY
Susan Emshwiller

Cast of Characters

SALLY, a young woman, daughter of Al. Tries to be strong and iconoclastic in order to hide her feelings.

ALEX, Sally's boyfriend.

KAREN, Sally's sister. Frills, lace, everything proper, with a tendency toward hysterics.

PETER, Sally's brother. Has strong bond with Sally.

DAD, Al Camden—father of Sally, Karen, and Peter. Uncomfortable with intimacy. Dying at sixty-five.

MOM, Wife of Al. In her sixties. Worn out.

These can all be played by the same actor:

WAITER

NURSE

FUNERAL DIRECTOR

SOBBING PHONE CALLER

PILOT

Time and Place

Present day, Los Angeles.

Setting

The stage is divided into five sections:

Downstage right is Sally's apartment: a hide-a-bed couch, a side-table with a lamp, television, small refrigerator, and kitchen table.

Up-center-stage is a chair, hospital bed with IV stand and privacy curtain behind it.

Downstage left is Al's apartment: a couch, small table and chair.

Upstage right is a small desk and chair.

Upstage left, a bench and phone.

DEFROSTING POPSICLES

by Susan Emshwiller

ACT I

Scene 1

(At rise: SALLY enters and walks downstage, a spotlight on her. She speaks directly to the audience, like a stand-up comedian in a comedy club.)

SALLY. *(Lighthearted and funny.)* I get this call on my machine. "Drive to the hospital, your dad is sick: blood clot in his intestines. Cut off circulation and killed off a whole section. He's got gangrene inside." I go in and he's in bed waiting for surgery. He is sickly. He is wheezing and moaning. He's in one of those dumb little green gowns. No one looks that sick in jeans and a shirt, but put you in a little green gown and you just shrivel up—all vulnerable and diseased. I go in and sit down beside him. I take his hand. There's dirt under his nails. "How you doing, Dad?" "It hurts bad." I squeeze his hand. It's yellow. He's yellow. And he stinks. He stinks like death. What do I know from death, but a smell like this really makes you want to leave the room and get away. But I stay. I say "I love you." It is the thing to say when someone's on their death bed. It's the thing you don't want to regret not having said. So, though I guess I love him, I say "I love you," 'cause that's what I'm supposed to say. And all I really want to do is leave and get away from the smell and yellow flesh. Then the nurse comes in and says I should wait outside while she puts a catheter in my father's penis. Yeah, I guess I'll wait outside. I go out and wait in the hallway. I stand in the hospital corridor while people come and go. The lights are bright. I come-to kind of and find I've been standing about three inches from the wall. Staring at the surface, my nose almost touching. I come-to and half of me says, "Hey, this is interesting. This is what someone does in a situation like this. I could use this." The other half continues to face the wall. Later I'm waiting in a small room while he's in surgery. I say "This must be what it's like to wait while someone's in an operation. And this is what the doctors look like at three in the morning after removing decaying intestines for hours." I shake their hands and thank them profusely. Dad is in intensive care. All the do-dads are beeping and dripping and monitoring. He's coming in and out of consciousness. Still touch and go. He comes-to and mumbles. Everyone else is back East. Ma. Brother. Sister.

Only me here. So I gotta be responsible. I listen to every mumble. It is very important that I keep track of every detail. He wakes up for a sec and says something. OK, scratch the last one. Remember this. Update—the latest last words. "Yeah. Ma? OK. His last words were 'People's Republic.' Yeah. 'People's Republic.' I don't know, Ma, maybe it's political." But I don't have to remember any details. He doesn't die. His stay in the hospital passes. He loses weight, and the smell of death goes away for the time being.

(SALLY curtseys.)

(Lights to black.)

Scene 2

(SALLY and ALEX are in bed in Sally's apartment. The lights are out. Darkness and silence for quite a few beats. There is a groan, and then a reply groan. It sounds a bit like slow lovemaking.)

SALLY. It's no good.

ALEX. Come on.

SALLY. It won't work.

ALEX. Try.

SALLY. I have.

ALEX. Try again.

SALLY. I did.

ALEX. Just close your eyes and relax.

SALLY. It doesn't work that way.

ALEX. It does for me.

SALLY. Well, you're you. I'm me, I can't.

ALEX. Try. Mind over matter.

(There are a few moments of quiet.)

SALLY. Nope. It won't work.

ALEX. Of course it won't work if you concentrate all your attention on it. You have to forget it.

SALLY. I can't just forget it.

ALEX. You want me to distract you?

(Kissing noises.)

SALLY. No. No! I won't be able to.

ALEX. Just forget about it.

SALLY. (*Angrily.*) Obviously you don't understand. Obviously you don't have this problem. I do. It's real.

(ALEX switches on the light.)

ALEX. What about last night? What about ten minutes ago. There was no problem then and it was there.

SALLY. What can I tell you? Ignorance is bliss. Can't you do something?

ALEX. What do you want me to do?

SALLY. Vacuum it.

ALEX. Sally, it's two in the morning!

SALLY. So?

ALEX. People vacuum during the day. They don't vacuum at night. Not at two. What will the landlady think?

SALLY. She'll think we keep the place clean. It won't take a second.

(ALEX rolls up a magazine.)

ALEX. This is ridiculous. Where is it?

SALLY. What're you gonna do?

ALEX. I'm gonna kill it. Where is it?

SALLY. You can't kill it! I don't want you to kill it! Just get rid of it.

ALEX. Where is it?

SALLY. If you kill it I still won't be able to sleep. Rather than waiting for it to slowly drop in a long silent descent onto my face, I'll be terrified of its friends out for revenge.

ALEX. Come on, a little melodramatic.

SALLY. Melodrama keeps people awake.

ALEX. I see it!

(ALEX stands on the bed and gets ready to swat something over his head.)

SALLY. I wish you'd vacuum it.

ALEX. So it lives happily ever after in a bag of dust and dog hairs? Sure, you can suck up a fly a week for its dinner.

SALLY. Look out! It's attacking!

(ALEX dodges back and swings in the air as SALLY leaps out of bed. ALEX whirls about in a panic.)

ALEX. Where'd it go? Where is it? Is it on me? Oh God! Look, damn it! Is it in my hair?

SALLY. (*Pointing to his pillow.*) Here. Here!

(ALEX leaps across the bed and swats the pillow.)

ALEX. Ta-da! Man over nature.

SALLY. Barely.

ALEX. (*Holding out the smudged pillow for SALLY.*) Last rites? Oh. Sorry, I didn't mean—

SALLY. It's fine. Maybe I should practice. (*She takes the pillow and gazes at it tenderly.*) Goodbye. I'll miss you. I love you. I think I got the hang of it.

(SALLY pops into bed and snuggles down comfortably. ALEX gingerly brushes the smudge from his pillow.)

(Blackout.)

Scene 3

(DAD lies sleeping in the hospital bed. He looks shrunken and pale-yellow. SALLY enters and hesitates when she sees him. She waffles a bit then finally approaches his side.)

SALLY. Hey, Dad.

DAD. (*Waking.*) Sally! Good to see you!

SALLY. You too.

(They smile, but neither makes a move to kiss or hug or touch. It's awkward.)

DAD. What's new?

SALLY. (*Sitting in the chair beside him.*) Not much, Dad.

DAD. How's the car running?

SALLY. Car's fine.

DAD. Good. It's a good car.

SALLY. Yeah.

(Long pause.)

DAD. How the old dog?

SALLY. Hanging in there.

DAD. Good. Old Grindle, getting as old as me.

SALLY. Almost.

(They both chuckle. Another pause. They are actually both trying hard to connect, but neither knows how.)

DAD. David dropped by yesterday.

SALLY. Oh yeah? Great. David?

DAD. Yeah, remember him?

SALLY. I'm not sure.

DAD. He was into video.

SALLY. Ah!

DAD. Yeah. He's got some new project he's starting.

SALLY. Well, that's good. Keeping busy.

DAD. You got any projects starting up?

SALLY. *(Surprised he doesn't realize she's been preoccupied with his illness:)* Uh, no—taking a little break.

DAD. I started a project.

SALLY. Oh yeah?

DAD. You know, gotta keep busy.

(Another silent moment. After a bit, DAD gets serious and leans forward to SALLY.)

DAD. Sally?

SALLY. Yeah, Dad?

DAD. I've got to ask you something.

SALLY. *(Hoping for a real moment:)* Anything, Dad.

DAD. *(Whispering to SALLY as he gestures over his shoulder.)* Who is that?

SALLY. Who is what?

DAD. Who is over there?

SALLY. Over where?

DAD. Shhhh. Over my shoulder. Who is that?

SALLY. No one's over there. I'm the only one here.

DAD. *(Frustrated at SALLY, he talks over his shoulder:)* Who are you?

(A WAITER appears from behind the privacy curtain. He is dressed in black. He leans over DAD.)

WAITER. I'm Bob. I'll be your waiter.

SALLY. *(Not seeing the WAITER:)* Dad, please. Take it easy.

DAD. Oh, good. Can I see a menu?

SALLY. What?

WAITER. You don't understand. I'm your waiter. I'm here to wait.

DAD. *(Gravely:)* Oh.

SALLY. You want something, Dad?

DAD. No.

(The WAITER straightens up and stands at attention behind DAD's shoulder, patiently waiting.)

(Fade to black.)

Scene 4

(SALLY is in her apartment crying on the couch. In front of her the television plays melodramatic music as its light flickers on her face.)

SALLY. *(Sobbing uncontrollably:)* Oh, God!

ALEX. *(Entering:)* Sally, are you all right?

SALLY. He's dead.

ALEX. I'm so sorry.

(ALEX sits beside SALLY. She sobs on his shoulder, still staring at the TV.)

ALEX. Here, let me turn this off.

SALLY. No. Don't. I'm watching it.

ALEX. OK. I'm sorry.

SALLY. I'm sorry I'm shook up. He just died—just before you came home.

ALEX. It's OK to be shook up. Jeez! You should be shook up.

SALLY. I wish—I wish—

ALEX. What? Tell me.

SALLY. I wish I had some popcorn.

ALEX. Popcorn?

SALLY. To go with the movie.

ALEX. *(Concerned that she's cracking up:)* Sally. Sally look at me. *(Taking her face in his hands, talking slowly and enunciating:)* I know you're upset. You're in shock.

SALLY. Shock?

ALEX. Yes. That happens to people at times like this. Let's turn off the TV and—

SALLY. I'm in the middle of the film! I want to see the end!

ALEX. Your father just died and you want—

SALLY. What! He died?!

(SALLY hops up, turns off the TV, and starts to put on her shoes and jacket.)

SALLY. Why didn't you tell me!?

ALEX. You said he died.

SALLY. I didn't say he died.

ALEX. I came home and you're sobbing and you say he died just before I came home.

SALLY. What? No—no—not my dad. *(Taking off her jacket and turning on the TV. Again.)* Jack Lemmon, Jack Lemmon just died.

ALEX. Jack Lemmon? I always liked him. But he died a long time ago, didn't he?

SALLY. Not in life. In the movie. In *Dad*. You know the movie all about the son, the guy from *Cheers*, coming to terms with his father dying? Jack Lemmon is Dad. He just died.

ALEX. So your father is alive.

SALLY. As far as I know.

(ALEX looks at the television. He is fascinated but disturbed by what he sees.)

ALEX. Sally, why are you watching this movie now?

SALLY. I'm in the mood.

(ALEX, getting engrossed in the film, hands a tissue to SALLY and takes one for himself. They both cry.)

(Fade to black)

Scene 5

(SALLY, KAREN, and MOM sit around DAD, who lies in the hospital bed.)

MOM. I told him we should write this all out ahead of time— did he listen? They keep people alive for years nowadays. Heaven knows what troubles we'll have to go through. The paperwork, lawyers, notarization...

KAREN. Do we have to talk about his in front of him?

SALLY. Karen, he's not here. Maybe if we wrote it out in his handwriting and said we found it in his sock drawer. I can do it. I can do both you guys. I had a lot of practice in school. "Please excuse my daughter Sally from Gym today..."

KAREN. You did!? I hated gym!

MOM. You haven't been tampering with his will have you?

SALLY. Mom—

(DAD starts shaking violently, having a "spell." EVERYONE talks at once, ad-libbing on their own themes.)

SALLY. *(Very soothing:)* It's OK. Relax. Relax. Calm down. It's all right...

MOM. *(Contradicting DAD's spell:)* You're fine dear. Everything's fine. You're doing fine. You'll be fine.

KAREN. *(Hysterical:)* Oh, my god! There he goes again. Is he dying?! Can't you do something? Oh my god!

(DAD begins to calm down but KAREN is still going off the deep end.)

SALLY. *(Turns toward her sister with the same tone she used on Dad:)* Relax. Calm down. Relax. It's all right.

(A NURSE enters.)

NURSE. I've been informed you want to request no extraordinary measures?

MOM. Yes. Do you have a form we can fill out?

NURSE. We don't have forms for this circumstance.

MOM. I knew it! Time and time again I said, "Al, do you want to live forever, even when there's nothing left upstairs?" I told him—

SALLY. *(To the NURSE:)* Can we talk to someone? We know he wanted—

MOM. He told me. I can swear to it. He told me we just never wrote it down—

NURSE. We don't have a form, but you can write it out.

MOM. What do you mean?

NURSE. Write it out in your own words and sign it.

(The NURSE starts to leave.)

SALLY. *(Stopping the NURSE:)* Do you have a piece of paper?

NURSE. *(Shocked at the question:)* No blank paper. We have paper, but not blank. A multitude of forms—but we can't distribute them. If they were to be filled out by unauthorized personnel and got into the system! We could be liable! I'm sorry. Any paper will do.

(The NURSE leaves.)

KAREN. I don't like this. We can't treat him like he's a piece of meat.

MOM. *(Fishing out little pad from her purse:)* This is all I have.

SALLY. Looks like paper to me.

MOM. Something like this, you'd think would be on some special form, or at least good stationery.

SALLY. Everything starts on a scrap of paper. The Ten Commandments was probably drafted on a napkin.

KAREN. Sally!

MOM. What should I say?

SALLY. Pull the plug.

KAREN. Sally!!!

SALLY. We request that no extraordinary measures be taken to prolong the life of Al Camden. Sign and date it.

KAREN. What if he isn't going to die? What if he's getting better?

MOM. *(Passing the pad to KAREN:)* Do you want to sign it, Karen?

KAREN. No! I can't do it. I just can't. I can't be a traitor.

(MOM holds the pad out to SALLY, who takes it.)

SALLY. I totally believe in this stuff. Euthanasia and all—

KAREN. *(Overlapping with SALLY:)* How're you gonna know? Someone gets old—

SALLY. —facilitated suicides—Mom, you ever need help just let me know.

MOM. Thanks, you're such a dear.

KAREN. —they get in the way, have a bad day, you gonna kill them for it?

SALLY. —just say the word, I'm there. Sleeping pills, off the roof, cyanide meatloaf—

MOM. Don't get over-anxious.

SALLY. I could add your name right now—

MOM. *(Looking at the paper wistfully:)* I wish it was typed at least. And had a seal of some sort.

SALLY. I can put on some lipstick, seal it with a kiss.

MOM. Thanks anyway. Would you get that to the nurse, Sally? I'm going to faint if I don't get some food in me. *(Picking up her purse and coat:)* Ready, Karen?

KAREN. What if he dies while we're out?!

MOM. Do you want to stay? Sally and I can go.

KAREN. No! What if he dies while you're out! I'm going!

MOM. OK. *(To SALLY:)* You sure you don't want anything?

SALLY. No, I'm fine.

MOM. You have to eat something. *(Poking though her big purse:)* I have a granola cookie in here somewhere for emergencies—

SALLY. I'll go after you come back. You go on.

(KAREN and MOM leave.)

(SALLY stands over her DAD. She starts to move back and forth, up and back, trying to put herself in his field of vision.)

SALLY. Hey Dad. You there? OK. You need anything, you let me know.

(ALEX enters quietly and watches SALLY moving around over DAD.)

ALEX. What are you doing?

SALLY. Hi. I was trying to get into his field of vision. His eyes are wandering all over, like he can't control them. I thought I'd try and let him see me, but I guess there's no point.

ALEX. How's he doing?

MOM. No, why should you come here?! She's the one who is causing all the ruckus with—

KAREN. All I said was—

SALLY. All right! Quiet! Both of you. Mom, I want you to get off the phone—

MOM. So she can tell you how I—

SALLY. I'll talk to Karen and then I'll talk to you. Now hang up. Come on.

(MOM hangs up.)

SALLY. OK, what happened?

KAREN. I don't know. I just was saying about how it would be nice if he died at home and she started screaming at me. Maybe I screamed back, but now she won't talk to me.

(MOM marches downstage to where KAREN is.)

MOM. I heard that! I didn't start screaming at you—

SALLY. Tell her to get on the phone.

KAREN. *(KAREN hands the phone to MOM and walks upstage.)* She wants to talk to you.

MOM. Hello.

SALLY. Mom, what's the story?

MOM. All I wanted was to have a nice evening at home feeling bad. I wanted to have a nice cry and feel close and feel bad. She tried to make it all my fault.

KAREN. *(Yelling from upstage:)* I didn't say it was your fault. Of course it's not your fault!

SALLY. Tell her to get on the phone.

MOM. *(Yelling upstage to KAREN:)* She wants to talk to you!

(MOM hangs up when KAREN picks up the extension.)

KAREN. Hello.

SALLY. Did she hang up?

KAREN. Yeah.

SALLY. Tell her to get back on.

KAREN. *(Yelling downstage:)* She wants you on also.

MOM. *(Picking up the phone.)* You here.

SALLY. *(Gives ALEX a long look for strength.)* OK. You both are going though a lot of stress. It's hard. I understand how frustrating it is for both of you. It makes you angry and there's nothing you can do to change anything. It's all out of your control. Mom, I'm sure Karen didn't mean that you didn't do everything as best you could all this time. Right, Karen?

KAREN. Right. You've done everything possible. I just thought—

SALLY. *(Cutting her off:)* And I'm sure Mom wanted to have a chance to cry. Mom, would you still like that?

MOM. That's all I wanted. A nice evening together feeling bad.

SALLY. Do you think you could give Mom a hug, Karen?

KAREN. I want to. I didn't mean to—

SALLY. OK. Do you want to try that, Mom?

MOM. If she's going to say I caused all this—

SALLY. She's not going to say anything. She's just going to hold you.

MOM. OK. I'll try.

KAREN. I'll try, too. I'm sorry, Mom.

MOM. I'm sorry, too.

SALLY. OK. Bye.

MOM. Bye.

SALLY. Bye.

KAREN. Bye.

(SALLY hangs up. MOM and KAREN stand for a moment holding their phones.)

MOM. Bye.

KAREN. Bye.

(KAREN and MOM hang up slowly and move to each other, hugging and crying. Their side of the stage blacks out.)

SALLY. Jeez Louise! In the same place, but they got to have a U. N. Negotiator to talk to each other. Jeez!

(The phone rings again.)

SALLY. That didn't last long.

ALEX. Round two!

SALLY. *(Answering the phone.)* Hello. Now what? Oh. I'll be right there.

(SALLY hangs up and starts dressing. Her clothes are set out like a fireman's: ready to go. Her face is blank.)

ALEX. You're not going up there! They're crazy!

(SALLY keeps dressing.)

ALEX. Sally?

SALLY. My dad died. I gotta go.

(ALEX reaches out to give her a hug, but SALLY avoids him. She starts to leave, then turns back.)

SALLY. Could you feed the dog?

Scene 7

(KAREN and MOM sit in the hospital room. DAD lies on the bed. MOM touches his leg. SALLY enters. KAREN leaps up to give SALLY a hug and begins wailing loudly. SALLY disentangles herself, hugs MOM, then sits.)

MOM. You got here fast.

SALLY. The roads were empty. The drive up was nice. As the sun came up a small plane went by. I thought of him in it. It looked like a good sky to be flying around in. (Finally looking at her dead DAD:) They sure tidied him up.

MOM. Yes, they fixed him up nice. Crisp sheets. Combed his hair. He looks peaceful. They combed his hair to the side, I had to comb it back.

SALLY. His beard looks weird.

KAREN. It does!? I didn't mean—I just wanted—his beard was such a symbol of who he—

MOM. It's OK. Karen took a snippet—

KAREN. I just wanted a lock of—I didn't mean to—

SALLY. Hey, take it easy. You can have the whole thing.

KAREN. You said it looks weird, maybe if I trim a little more...

(KAREN takes tiny scissors from her purse and cuts a little bit from one side of DAD's beard, putting the clippings in a folded piece of paper. SALLY sits and touches her father's dead hand.)

MOM. They said we could have a few minutes, but they need to take him soon.

SALLY. He's not too cold.

MOM. No.

KAREN. Ah! I think he's still breathing!

SALLY. No. No, Karen. It looks that way though, huh? We're so used to seeing what bodies do. Like his heart—is just sitting there. Like road kill on the highway.

(KAREN and MOM give SALLY horrified looks. SALLY wiggles DAD's finger.)

SALLY. No rigor mortis yet. I wonder when it sets in.

MOM. Sally, must you?

SALLY. He's my dad. You think I'm going to go into some other room and touch some other dead finger and check for rigor mortis?

KAREN. It's not respectful.

SALLY. Respectful? I always was so respectful—always scared when someone said their so-and-so died. I didn't know what to say. What if they start crying? I didn't want to hurt them. I would mumble the usual "I'm so sorry for your loss" and change the subject. I was scared because I didn't know what they felt. It never happened to me. Now it has, and I want to explore. I want to feel how cold he is going to get. What his skin feels like. This is all new to me.

KAREN. Your dad died. Why aren't you crying?

SALLY. Your dad died. Why aren't you exploring?

MOM. Can we have some peace?

(They sit in silence for a little bit. SALLY still is quietly checking things. MOM shoots her a look. SALLY stops, but she doesn't seem to know what to do if she can't be busy with something. She rolls her head around.)

SALLY. Do you have any aspirin, Mom?

MOM. Tylenol or Bayer?

SALLY. My neck is killing me. I think I have spinal meningitis.

MOM. Bayer.

(MOM digs the Bayer out of her purse and hands to SALLY, who, after seeing that the only cup of water in the room is the dead man's, pockets the aspirin for later.)

KAREN. Spinal meningitis? Where does it hurt?

SALLY. Maybe I caught it from Dad. When I said goodbye yesterday—

KAREN. You said “Goodbye”!? I didn’t say “Goodbye.” Did you say “Goodbye,” Ma? I didn’t say “Goodbye.” You said “Goodbye”?

SALLY. I don’t know if I said “Goodbye” as such—

KAREN. But you might have? You might have said “goodbye”?

SALLY. What is the big deal?

KAREN. I didn’t. I said “see you later.” I didn’t want to be rude. You think I should have said “goodbye”?

SALLY. No, Karen. I think he probably appreciated your consideration. Anyway, I said something, and kissed him and I felt a breath from him as I did. I could feel it zipping into my lungs, like in *Polttergeist* or something. I think I caught Death Breath.

(KAREN and SALLY both rub their necks.)

KAREN. In the neck, right? You said the neck. I think I have this, too. Spinal meningitis?

(A NURSE enters.)

NURSE. I’m afraid you’ll have to go now.

(SALLY, KAREN, and MOM stand abruptly.)

MOM. All right. *(She kisses DAD on the forehead.)* Goodbye dear. Can I say that now, you think?

KAREN. I think. *(KAREN kisses DAD on the forehead.)* Bye, Dad.

(The NURSE leaves. KAREN and MOM start to exit. SALLY waffles a bit.)

SALLY. I wonder—I was wondering if these windows open.

(KAREN and MOM look baffled.)

SALLY. You know, just in case his spirit is waiting to get out of this hospital. Wouldn’t want it trapped in here.

KAREN. God, that would be horrible. All alone, roaming the air conditioning ducts...

MOM. Try. Better safe than sorry.

(SALLY tries to open the window. No luck.)

SALLY. I guess they don’t want dangerous, fresh air to invade the hospital. Who knows where it’s been.

MOM. We’d better go.

(MOM and SALLY start to leave. Now KAREN waffles.)

KAREN. We can’t just leave! —What if—in case his spirit—you never know—

(SALLY takes a moment then opens her purse near DAD’s face.)

SALLY. OK. Dad. Here, hop in my purse. I’ll take you outside. Come on. Hop in. You in?

(KAREN, SALLY, and MOM all peer into the purse.)

KAREN. You should have cleaned it out before you left.

MOM. I thought I told you, never let a man see the inside of your purse!

(Lights fade.)

Scene 8

(Lights fade up as SALLY enters from the far wing downstage and walks very slowly across the front of the stage. She is in an overcoat and carrying her purse, staring at the ground. She stops short. After a moment, she looks around, checking to see if she’s being watched. Slowly, she opens up her purse. She waits a moment and gives it a little jiggle. Closing it, she quickly moves on and exits.)

(Lights to black.)

End of Act I

ACT II

Scene 1

(Al's apartment. KAREN looks through a box of photos. MOM sits next to her on the couch. SALLY looks through some files and papers.)

KAREN. Oh look! There's me on Dad's shoulders.

MOM. You were so cute!

KAREN. He only has a goatee—I guess he did have a chin after all.
(They flip to another picture.)

MOM & KAREN. Ohhhhhhhhhhh!

(SALLY looks up from her work, uncomfortable with the sentimentality.)

MOM. Sally, come look. Ohhhhhh! It makes me want to cry. Come look, Sally.

SALLY. What is it? I've seen them all already.

(SALLY drags herself reluctantly to the couch. She looks at the photo. It affects her but she tries to shut the feeling out.)

MOM. You two could just sit for hours not saying a thing to each other. You just leaned against his shoulder and watched him work. Look how serious you were. You were watching his every move.

SALLY. *(Going back to her files.)* Did I tell you the veterans insurance needs the death certificate? I'll make sure they get one. Oh, and the banks, the banks say that there is no problem because the accounts are in both your names.

(KAREN flips over another photo. More "Oooohs." SALLY dials the phone and waits, on hold.)

SALLY. And I spoke to the people over there with the annuity. It kicks in as soon as they get a copy of the death certificate.

MOM. I really appreciate you doing all this. I just can't. I'm just too...

SALLY. *(Singing to the muzak.)* "Trying to forget my feelings of love." Jeez, they think I got all the time in the world?

MOM. That the newspaper?

SALLY. Funeral home.

MOM. Did you call the paper?

SALLY. Yeah, they need the funeral home's OK to do the obituary. Apparently people have been doing fake ones to get out of debt.

(PETER enters.)

MOM. Peter!

PETER. *(Giving MOM a hug.)* Hey, Ma. How are you?

MOM. I don't know.

(Their hug ends and MOM surveys her son, PETER.)

MOM. You're in black. Very appropriate.

PETER. Of course I'm in black. I came from a New York party.

SALLY. You look terrible.

PETER. Of course I look terrible. I came from a New York party.

(PETER gives SALLY a warm hug. He then gives KAREN a hug and she instantly starts wailing. He lets go when he can.)

SALLY. How'd you get here?

PETER. I rented a car at the airport.

SALLY. I would have picked you up.

PETER. I know you would have.

KAREN. I would have picked you up, too.

PETER. I know.

MOM. I can't drive, I'm too wobbly.

PETER. It doesn't matter. I raced up here. I was kinda hoping a cop would stop me. Finally have a good excuse. "Can I see your license, sir. A New Yorker eh, you know we're laid-back here in California. We don't live in the rat-race. You were going mighty fast." *(Pretending to cry.)* "I'm sorry—officer. I—I'm trying to—get to my father's funeral—he died yesterday—" I woulda loved that.

(Spotlight comes up on upstage right desk. The FUNERAL DIRECTOR picks up the phone.)

FUNERAL DIRECTOR. Hello, sorry to keep you waiting. Can I help you?

SALLY. This is the family of Al Camden. I think you have him over there.

FUNERAL DIRECTOR. Yes we do. He's with us now. I'm sorry for your loss.

SALLY. Yeah, well, thanks. Listen, I understand we need your OK for the obituary.

FUNERAL DIRECTOR. Yes, ma'am, we'd be happy to notify the newspapers.

SALLY. Well, that's taken care of then.

FUNERAL DIRECTOR. Yes, ma'am. I understand cremation is the wish of departed.

SALLY. Yeah. About the ashes, we were thinking—

FUNERAL DIRECTOR. Don't tell me! I don't want to know! Everything you want to do is illegal. It is illegal to scatter the ashes anywhere on land. It's illegal to bury them. You can scatter them at sea, but you must be three miles off the coast. Some people think, what does it matter, no one will know. We had one of our clients throw her husband off the Santa Monica pier. It was late at night, no one around. Well, that was fine only she kept him in the box. It has our address on it. Police came here asking how Mr. Wilson ended up as the gray tower on a kid's sand castle. Whatever you do, don't tell me, and please, dispose of the box.

SALLY. OK.

MOM. Ask them where he's getting cremated.

SALLY. Where's he getting cremated?

FUNERAL DIRECTOR. We work with a good facility in Long Beach.

SALLY. Long Beach—

SALLY, MOM, & KAREN. (*SALLY into phone:*) Aren't there any closer?

FUNERAL DIRECTOR. That's the nearest reliable one. Many are not.

SALLY. Not reliable?

MOM. What? What's going on? What do you mean not reliable?

FUNERAL DIRECTOR. Some of them aren't too particular whose ashes are whose.

SALLY. Keep an ongoing pile of ashes and scoop out a few pounds per package.

FUNERAL DIRECTOR. That's about it.

MOM & KAREN. Ahhhhhh!

FUNERAL DIRECTOR. We'll have the departed in the rose room for viewing today if any of the bereft wish to pay their last respects.

SALLY. Thank you.

(*SALLY hangs up the phone. The lights on the FUNERAL DIRECTOR black out. MOM, KAREN, and PETER stare at SALLY.*)

SALLY. What?

MOM. Is everything OK?

SALLY. Sure. We can pop over and see him today. Say adios—

PETER. (*Heartfelt:*) I'd like to.

(*MOM and KAREN put their arms around PETER. SALLY watches for an uncomfortable moment, then opens her files again, a little frantically.*)

SALLY. Shit. Where's that number for United Airlines? I gotta get his frequent flier miles transferred.

(*Lights start to fade.*)

SALLY. Waste of good miles if someone doesn't use them. Where's that damn number?!

(*Fade to black.*)

Scene 2

(*Downstage center, small spotlight fades up on the face of DAD. He is on a cart, a sheet covering his body. His head rests on a square 4" block of wood. Slowly The Family enters, seen primarily as dark silhouettes. They hover at a polite distance around DAD. MOM moves forward and puts her hand on DAD's leg. KAREN moves forward and touches his arm. PETER slowly moves forward, kisses DAD's forehead and then lets his hand rest on the dead man's shoulder. SALLY remains at a distance, arms tightly held at her sides.*)

(*Lights fade to black.*)

Scene 3

(*ALEX sits on the couch of their apartment reading Kubler-Ross's On Death and Dying. A small table lamp is lit beside him. SALLY enters groggily in her pajamas. ALEX makes a slight attempt to hide the book. SALLY sits next to him, picks up the book from beside him.*)

SALLY. *On Death and Dying.* Murder mystery, eh?

ALEX. I thought I might be able to understand. Maybe be of more help.

SALLY. Help? Everything is taken care of. The body is going to Long Beach, the memorial service is scheduled, Goodwill is going to come by, I think things are going smoothly.

ALEX. Yeah. You've got everything under control.

SALLY. Death is a lot of work. Do they say that in there?

ALEX. Haven't gotten to that part yet. Just the pain and grief part.

SALLY. *(Getting up quickly:)* I'm hungry. I got a craving for soup. You want some?

ALEX. It's kind of late.

SALLY. I'm making soup. I need soup right now.

ALEX. I bought some chicken noodle the other day.

SALLY. I'm making homemade. Homemade soup. Fresh and tasty. Doesn't that sound good?

ALEX. Sure. You want any help.

SALLY. Nah.

(SALLY grabs a cutting board, knife from the table. She opens the fridge and stops, staring inside. Long moment. ALEX watches her.)

ALEX. Sally?

(SALLY holds up a finger for him to be quiet. Another long moment. Finally she closes the fridge door and brings the cutting board and knife down to the couch.)

SALLY. What a weird dream. I just remembered this weird dream.

ALEX. What?

SALLY. I was eating a lot of different-colored popsicles at the same time and I couldn't finish them all, so I put all the popsicle ends in a Tupperware bowl and put them in the freezer. I thought this was a very good idea: if you can't eat them all now save the ends for when you can.

ALEX. *(As Dr. Freud:)* I see. Very interesting. And vat do you sink zees means?

SALLY. I haven't the foggiest. With everything that is going on in my life, dreaming about—

ALEX. Ice cream.

SALLY. No, popsicles. Definitely popsicles. Pop-sick-cles. Pop sick. Pop is sick. Dad is sick.

ALEX. And you can't eat it all now, you can't deal with it all now, so you put it in the freezer for later. That's good.

SALLY. It is. God, I could never think of something like that. I wish I was that clever when I'm awake. My therapist will love this.

(SALLY goes back to the fridge and takes out a brown bag.)

ALEX. Oh! I forgot to tell you that your therapist called. She said she can schedule you in for a second session a week whenever you want.

SALLY. A second session? Why would I need that?

ALEX. I'm just relaying the message.

SALLY. Besides I can't afford to go two times a week. My insurance doesn't cover any of it unless there is a family crisis or something.

ALEX. A family crisis?

SALLY. Yeah. So I'm out of luck.

(SALLY sits on the couch and takes several onions from the bag.)

ALEX. What kind of soup?

SALLY. French onion soup. You'll love it. I'm dying for French onion.

(SALLY starts to cut an onion on the board on her lap. ALEX watches.)

ALEX. I thought you didn't like onion soup.

SALLY. *(Ignoring him:)* My dad always liked French onion. He was in France, did you know? After the war. I don't know if that's why he liked the soup.

(The onion chopping is starting to have its effect. SALLY is sniffing and tearing up.)

SALLY. I keep thinking we're going to be able to talk about this afterward. You know, "So, Dad, what were you really thinking when you were dying? How did it feel? Remember when the doctors did this and that—" Like it is just another event that we shared and we can discuss and joke about.

(SALLY wipes her tears on her sleeve.)

ALEX. Do you regret anything?

SALLY. Regret?

ALEX. I mean, before he died, did you want

SALLY. No. I said everything. I mean— What would I regret?

ALEX. I don't know. I was just asking. Do you want help with tha—

SALLY. (*Chopping onions furiously.*) I don't know what—it wasn't like I could have— What am I gonna do, kneel down on the tile floor? It was stupid. It wasn't like we were in the manger or anything.

ALEX. (*Truly baffled.*) What?

SALLY. OK! OK! I wanted his blessing! I wanted a traditional blessing as in the Old Testament. The father puts his hand on the kid's head and gives his blessing. It's like saying "I believe in you and all the things you are going to do. I support you in your decisions in life." That's what I wanted. It isn't "I love you."—whatever that means anymore. It's not anything a friend gives you, or a lover, it's what a father can give his kid. His blessing. I didn't get it. I was afraid to ask.

(*SALLY is crying up a storm, ALEX reaches for her.*)

ALEX. Sally, come here.

SALLY. I gotta finish.

ALEX. You're crying and—

SALLY. Of course I'm crying, it's the onions.

ALEX. It's OK to cry.

SALLY. I know it's OK! It's what happens. You try and cut onions without crying! It's a pain but if you want god-damn, homemade onion soup there's no other way to do it. You can't get soup like this out of a can—you gotta cut onions! And you cut onions, you cry—that's the way it is!

(*SALLY continues to chop and cry.*)

(*Lights fade.*)

Scene 4

(*Al's apartment. The Family sits sorting Al's stuff. There are piles of clothes, photos, objects scattered about. A large pile of storage boxes sits on the floor. Across the room a single box marked "Goodwill."*)

MOM. (*Holding up a tattered cowboy hat.*) Do you want his hat? Someone's gotta take this hat.

SALLY. It doesn't fit me.

KAREN. I'd like to, but it doesn't fit me either—

MOM. Peter, you try. It'll fit you. Oh, it looks good!

PETER. I won't wear it. People don't wear these in New York. Besides I have too much to carry as it is.

MOM. But it's his trademark. We can't give it to Goodwill.

SALLY. Why don't you take it, Ma.

MOM. I don't want to see it all the time. It'll just make me cry. (*Starting to cry now.*) I just want to know it exists.

SALLY, KAREN, & PETER. I'll take it.

MOM. No, let's give it to Goodwill. (*She slowly puts it in the Goodwill box.*)

SALLY, KAREN, & PETER. (*All reaching for it.*) We'll put it in storage.

MOM. Good, let's put it in storage.

(*MOM takes it from the single Goodwill box and hands it to PETER, who hands it to SALLY, who hands it to KAREN, who sobs and puts it on top of the storage boxes.*)

PETER. Do we have any more coffee?

KAREN. (*Exiting.*) I'll get it. Anyone else?

MOM. You sure are drinking a lot of coffee.

PETER. I'm from New York. Gotta keep my edge.

MOM. Oh, I'll have some. I need an edge.

KAREN. (*Offstage.*) More plastic cups!

MOM. More!?

(*KAREN throws a huge industrial-sized bag of plastic cups onstage.*)

MOM. I want a real cup!

(*MOM sits and looks through a large box of papers and desk items.*)

MOM. What's all this?!

SALLY. From his office. I cleaned it out today.

(*KAREN enters and hands coffees to PETER and MOM, and sips one herself.*)

SALLY. I went in and I couldn't believe that it wasn't his anymore. That someone else would be working there. Someone else taking over his job. I looked at his desk. There was still a cup of coffee on it, sitting there where he had last touched it. It looked so mundane. One second you're drinking coffee and the next you're dead.

(KAREN, MOM, and PETER set down their cups in unison.)

SALLY. It gave me chills to look at it. The tenuousness of life. His last cup of coffee. His last memo. His last doodle.

PETER. That's weird. Makes you want the room sealed. A shrine or something.

(KAREN looks through the box from the office.)

SALLY. Then his assistant came in. "You see my cup of coffee—oh, there it is." He took it, his memos, and left. This whole poignant scenario—poof! I was getting so much feeling out of that cup of coffee and it wasn't even Dad's.

KAREN. More rubber bands.

MOM. More! How could he have more rubber bands!?

KAREN. These ones are old. These ones are dried beef-jerky rubber bands. Rubber jerky.

(The phone rings.)

MOM. (Flipping out:) It's probably another person wanting to tell me all about how much she can sympathize and how her husband went through the same thing and did I try homeopathic medicine because her husband got better and I should have tried chanting and acupuncture—I did the best I could!!

PETER. We know Mom. You were there all along. You did everything.

(MOM goes to the phone.)

MOM. I wish they would all leave me alone.

SALLY. Don't answer. Let the machine get it.

MOM. I don't need to know how crystals could have saved him and if I'd only—

AL'S VOICE. This is Al's answering machine.

(Everyone stops and stares at the machine, listening as the dead man talks.)

AL'S VOICE. If you want to leave a message, wait for the beep.

(The machine beeps.)

CALLER ON THE PHONE. (Choking up:) I—I didn't expect to hear—his voice—I'll call back later—

(The Family bursts out laughing.)

PETER. We better change the message. (He stands over the machine.) What should I say? "This is Al's answering machine. I won't ever be getting back to you..."

SALLY. Wait!

PETER. What?

SALLY. Use a different tape.

PETER & MOM. Why?

SALLY. I want that one.

MOM. That's a strange thing to want.

SALLY. I called him all the time. I got his machine all the time. I just want it.

(PETER shrugs and hands the tape to SALLY, who turns away quickly. KAREN continues looking through boxes. She pulls out a black comb.)

KAREN. This comb has some of his hairs in it. Anyone want some?

PETER. No thanks, I got the juicy ones out of the shower drain.

MOM. (Picking up a fancy red case.) Oh, my goodness, here's that award he won a few years ago.

KAREN. What is it?

PETER. (Looking inside:) Just an ornate bottle of 75 year old cognac.

SALLY. Any left?

PETER. Unopened. Seal intact.

SALLY. I'm amazed.

MOM. He must have been keeping it for a special occasion.

SALLY. Death is pretty special.

KAREN. Seventy-five. It outlasted Dad by ten years.

PETER. And it got better with age. Let's have a toast.

MOM. Peter. It's two in the afternoon.

SALLY. Dad finally got his special occasion.

PETER. We could start a tradition. Have a toast for special occasions. Whenever the family has something happen—something we want Dad at, we could toast. Marriages, births, whatever.

SALLY. So, toast him not being there?

PETER. No, more like, Dad was here for this event.

SALLY. We did that. We wished him there for events. Didn't work.

MOM. A father can't be there for every event a little kid wants him at.

SALLY. No. You're right. And he won't be for this one.

KAREN. We don't know that. He might be. He might be here right now.

PETER. Let's toast.

MOM. Al didn't have any nice glasses.

PETER. We have a lot of plastic.

KAREN. It won't clink.

PETER. We can say "clink." Come on. Let's start a tradition.

(KAREN gets out four plastic cups. PETER breaks the seal on the bottle. MOM watches. SALLY is a bit reluctant. PETER pours a little for each. He raises his glass.)

PETER. Anybody?

(He looks around. Everyone in turn shakes their head.)

Well. Uh Dad? We are gathered here as a family. Toasting. And hoping you will join us. We want you to join us in the future when we come together and toast family events. Things we want to celebrate as a family. Things we know you'd want to be part of. We know you'd be here if you could. Cheers Dad.

(PETER pushes his glass into the center of the group.)

PETER. Clink.

KAREN. Clink.

MOM. Clink.

SALLY. *(Very quietly:)* Clink.

(They all raise the plastic cups to their lips.)

(Lights fade.)

Scene 5

(SALLY sits on the floor in the center of the stage. She lights a candle. There is a wine glass and half a bottle beside her. The rest of the stage is in darkness. SALLY looks around in the dark. Listening.)

SALLY. Are you there? Are you there, Dad? Can you hear me? Is there life after death? Can you give me a sign? An image? A sound? A word? Something? Can you knock three times? Huh, Dad? Can you? If you can—if you can and you are near and can hear me and can give me a sign...don't. Don't do it. I don't want a peep. I don't want even the most vague enigmatic sign. You hear? Nothing. You had your chance. You could have said plenty. It was a lot easier before. When we were both in the same dimension. Both in the same space. Same time. Same family. Oh, maybe you're enlightened? Maybe you see the error of your ways. Tough. I say no. I forbid it. You want to hang around, feel free. But I don't want to hear a sound. I'll let you know if I ever forgive you.

(SALLY blows out the candle.)

(Black.)

Scene 6

(KAREN, PETER, and MOM wait in Al's apartment, all of them avoiding the couch. On it is a small cardboard box. SALLY enters and hands a camera to PETER.)

SALLY. Where is he?

MOM. Over there. On the couch. I got him today.

SALLY. In the mail?

MOM. No! I picked him up. He sat next to me in the car. There was a lot of traffic. I thought of taking the carpool lane but I wasn't sure.

KAREN. *(Leaning over the box in horror:)* This is so serious. What if this was all a joke on his part and he wants to come back now and—now he has no place to go!

PETER. He should have thought of that sooner.

SALLY. I have to get this ready.

(SALLY cuts open the box. EVERYONE moves in as she slowly makes a horror sound "creak" as she tilts back the lids. They all peer gingerly into the box. SALLY slowly lifts out a plastic bag of gray dust.)

SALLY. Hey Dad.

MOM. *(Distressed:)* Mmm!

SALLY. *(To MOM:)* You OK?

(MOM nods, hand over her mouth.)

SALLY. (*Wiggling the bag and imitating Dad's voice:*) Peter, you want to take some pictures?

MOM. He would have done the same.

(*SALLY untwists the tie and opens the bag as PETER steadies the camera on the edge of a table.*)

PETER. Ready? Gather closer. Come on, Mom. Karen. OK, stand by. Family snapshot.

(*PETER pushes the timer and runs over to join the group. SALLY holds up the bag of ashes. Everyone smiles widely. SALLY sticks a pinkie into the gray dust.*)

SALLY. Wanna snort?

MOM & KAREN. (*Complete horror:*) Sally!

(*The camera flashes.*)

(*Black.*)

Scene 7

(*An airplane. The Family sits in two rows of folding chairs, SALLY and PETER in the first row. MOM and KAREN in the second. In front of them is a bench with fans on either end, pointing back at the family. The PILOT sits on the floor in front of the bench wearing headphones and sunglasses. He turns on the fans.*)

SALLY. All the trouble I took never to fly with him and here I am with him on my lap.

PETER. Why didn't you ever fly with him?

SALLY. You've been away too long.

PETER. This is cool. I woulda done it.

MOM. I did it all the time.

PETER. Did you enjoy it?

MOM. Enjoy? I was petrified. But a husband finally fulfills his boyhood dream at sixty, a wife plays along.

SALLY. I can manage it on airlines 'cause you can picture the pilots like in the ads. Calm, controlled, with distinguished gray...but some old geezer who is just learning... (*Old codger voice:*) "It was exciting, I forgot to land into the wind and came down with it instead. What a hoot. Almost crashed into the mountain. You shoulda been there."

PETER. I see your point. Can't say he ever struck me as distinguished gray either. More like Skid Row—

KAREN. Please! I'm trying to—can't we have this be special?

SALLY & PETER. Sorry.

MOM. This looks like a good spot. Over the mountains. Look at all the poppies.

SALLY & PETER. (*As the Wicked Witch from The Wizard of Oz:*) "Poppies will put them to sleep. Sl-eeeeeee-p."

KAREN. Should we say something?

SALLY & PETER. We just did.

KAREN. MOM!

MOM. Come on kids,

SALLY. OK, Dad, Geronimo time.

KAREN. I mean something—some words,—you know—

MOM. Are you strapped in?

SALLY. Yeah. Peter, take a picture when I sprinkle it out. And Karen, why don't you say something then,

KAREN. I don't want to say something. I don't have anything to say—I didn't mean me. I'll try—

(*SALLY opens the bag of ashes and mimes pushing on a door.*)

SALLY. Wow, it's hard to open the door.

KAREN. Bye, Dad!

(*SALLY sprinkles out the dust and it flies back from the fan's wind, all over them.*)

KAREN. —AHHHH!

SALLY. Ow! Dad's in my eye! Ow! Ow!

MOM. Close the door!

PETER. He's screwing up the camera!

KAREN. He's all over me. Stop it! Stop it!

SALLY. Dad scratched my eyeball!

MOM. Close the door!

KAREN. He's in my clothes! He's in my hair!

MOM. Open the vents! Open the vents!

(PETER helps SALLY and together they slam the imaginary door.)

PETER. (As a newscaster.) Grieving family dies as small plane crashes when father's ashes obliterate view.

SALLY. God! I thought this was going to be poignant and moving.

MOM. I thought you were going to fall out.

KAREN. He's in my teeth. I'll probably be washing him off for weeks.

SALLY. Bits of him are in my eyes! (Suddenly singing to the tune of "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes:") They—asked me how I knew—my poor dad was through—

SALLY & PETER. (Singing together.) —when your dad's on fire,—you must realize—bits get in your eyes—

SALLY, KAREN, MOM, & PETER. (All singing.) —Bits get in your eyes.

(Fade to black.)

Scene 8

(SALLY enters her apartment. ALEX has been waiting for her. He stands and gives her a long hug.)

ALEX. How'd it go?

SALLY. All done. Got a bit messy, but one way or another we scattered the ashes.

ALEX. How do you feel?

SALLY. Fine. That's the last of it. All done. Peter flew back to New York. Dad'll probably be falling out of his cuffs on Fifth Avenue.

ALEX. Huh?

SALLY. Never mind.

ALEX. Are you hungry? Can I get you anything? We got lots of leftover onion soup.

SALLY. No. I'm just going to put on some nice music and forget everything for a while.

ALEX. (Sensing her need for solitude.) I'll leave you. I got some things to do, I'll be back in a while.

SALLY. OK.

(ALEX leaves. SALLY waits for a while until she feels he isn't returning for anything. Then she pulls a portable cassette player from a drawer in the side table and opens her purse. She pulls out a cassette tape. Blows on it. A cloud of grey dust rises. She puts it into the player, and turns it on.)

AL'S VOICE. This is Al's answering machine. If you want to leave a message, please wait for the beep.

(The machine beeps. SALLY slowly sits and stares at the machine. She rewinds and plays it again.)

AL'S VOICE. This is Al's answering machine. If you want to leave a message, please wait for the beep.

(SALLY starts to cry. She plays it again.)

AL'S VOICE. This is Al's answering machine. If you want to leave a message, please wait for the beep.

(She cries and cries, deep wrenching sobs, as the machine plays out and on.)

(Lights slowly fade to black.)

End of Play