

**CAPTAIN, MAY I?**

A 10-minute play

Characters

CAPTAIN (70s), represented by an empty wheelchair.

ANN (40s), his daughter.

TRISH (30s), his daughter.

Time

Mid-May.

Place

A room in a nursing home. Besides the Captain's wheelchair, there are two regular chairs and a wastebasket.

**CAPTAIN, MAY I?**

*An empty wheelchair stands in for the comatose CAPTAIN. After a moment TRISH enters, carrying an oversized purse.*

TRISH

*(With forced cheer.)*

Hi, Daddy.

*(Kisses him on the cheek.)*

Oh, your skin is so cold.

*(Picks up a folded shawl from another chair and wraps his shoulders.)*

The middle of May and it's seventy-five degrees outside, while in here it feels like sixty.

*(Shivers and dons a cardigan from her purse.)*

I told them at the desk not to bring you lunch today because I have a special treat.

*(Pulls a plastic bag from her purse.)*

You're going to love this. Look--pastrami on rye and split pea soup, the way you like it, with bacon and Parmesan cheese. Doesn't it smell good?

*(Seated, begins to offer him food.)*

Let's dig in, OK? How about a nice bite of sandwich? Open up.

*(Beat, no response.)*

Here, let me break it up for you.

*(Beat, no response.)*

OK, maybe we'll start with soup.

*(Also futile.)*

You know where I got this, don't you? Marco's. That's right, the restaurant where I work. The one with the booths. On Wells, next to where you used to take Ann and me for sundaes, remember? I still get sundaes there sometimes before my shift. I always remember what you used to say. "Come on, girls, hearty up," you always said. "Hearty up, hearty up." I have no idea where you got that--Army, I suppose.

*(Beat.)*

OK, how about some potato chips?

*(She rummages in the bag.)*

Darn, left them at the restaurant. I'm sorry, Daddy, I know how you like chips, the plain old thin ones. Forgive me?

*(Beat.)*

Will you?

*(Beat.)*

I'll bring some next time.

*TRISH resumes futilely trying to feed CAPTAIN. After a moment ANN enters.*

ANN

Hey, Trish.

*At the sound of her voice, TRISH hides the food behind her purse.*

TRISH

Ann, hi. What're you doing here? I always visit on the third Wednesday. You were supposed to come last week.

ANN

Yeah, well, I didn't make it.

TRISH

Don't tell me you forgot. Great.

ANN

Yeah, the mind's starting to go. Maybe you should get me on the waiting list for the next available room.

TRISH

Don't kid about that.

ANN

Yeah? Then what should I kid about?

*(She shivers.)*

Damn this air conditioning.

*ANN pulls the CAPTAIN's shawl from his shoulders and drapes it over hers as she sits. TRISH slips out of her cardigan and wraps CAPTAIN with it.*

ANN

Aren't you cold?

TRISH

*(Unconvincingly.)*

Um, no.

ANN (CONT'D)

Jesus, you always were a freak.

*(She peers at CAPTAIN's chin.)*

What the hell?

*(She points and turns on TRISH.)*

What's that?

TRISH

...Bile?

*ANN wipes a spot, smells her finger.*

TRISH (CONT'D)

That's it--bile. You know...like they have to drink on that TV stunt show.

ANN

*(Licks her finger.)*

Bile, my ass.

*ANN grabs for TRISH's purse, overpowering her easily, and uncovering the food.*

ANN

Pea soup! Pastrami! What'd I tell you about feeding him this crap?

TRISH

It's not crap. It's from Marco's.

ANN

And you know what that rich food does to his bowels?

TRISH

He only ate a little.

ANN

I'm sure. You want to deal with the repercussions?

TRISH

There won't be any repercussions.

ANN

Like hell. All that fat running through him--I'm not cleaning it up.

*ANN drops the food in the wastebasket.*

TRISH

You should be more respectful.

ANN

Oh, that's right. Because he can still hear us. I forgot.

*(In CAPTAIN's ear.)*

Day six hundred eighty seven--almost two years since you faded away. How's it feel not giving orders any more?

*(Beat.)*

You got that right, old soldier.

*(Beat.)*

Look, I'm going to get him something his stomach can handle.

*ANN exits.*

TRISH

*(Fidgeting, picking lint, folding and refolding a napkin.)*Daddy, I'm sorry about Ann. I didn't think she would be here today. I was looking forward to a private visit. I thought we could talk. I mean...I could talk.

(MORE)

TRISH (CONT'D)

*(Beat as she looks to the door.)*

Well...let me just introduce a subject. Just briefly, so you can think about it.

*(She removes some notes from her purse, consulting them, then...)*

I met this boy. This man. At the restaurant. Actually he's a customer. He comes in a few times a month for lunch. I think you might know him. How? Well, he eats alone, and while he eats he works on IRS papers, which of course I can spot a mile away after seeing all the tax stuff you used to bring home. So it might be somebody from your old office. Anyway, he's a bit older than me, maybe Ann's age...

*(Beat.)*

Well, usually he comes in and he orders a BLT and eats it with his head down while he works...

*(Beat.)*

Except yesterday. Yesterday, he asked me for another ice tea. He doesn't usually have two, but it was so hot...and for the first time, he looked at me. And he smiled.

*(Beat, trying to lighten the mood.)*

And...and it was not an IRS kind of smile, Daddy, not at all.

ANN

*(Reappearing with a bowl and spoon.)*

Chow time!

TRISH

What's that?

ANN

Cream of wheat. No butter, no salt.

TRISH

No taste. You could at least mix in a little pea soup.

*ANN sits, and begins feeding CAPTAIN, slowly and delicately at first, then with gradually increasing aggressiveness.*

ANN

No way. With his digestive tract, the old man doesn't have a legume [leg-yoom] to stand on.

TRISH

I bet he hates that.

ANN

A little joke isn't going to kill him...unfortunately.

TRISH

I mean the creamy wheat. I don't think he likes it.

ANN

What makes you so sure?

TRISH

He never ate it in real life.

ANN

This is his real life now, kid. In this life, cream of wheat makes the world go 'round, the perfect meal-ready-to-eat.

TRISH

Someone his age should be able to indulge in a little luxury now and then.

ANN

Come on, you never heard of poetic justice?

TRISH

I don't know what you mean.

ANN

Don't play dumb, Trish. The Captain always ran a tight company, but now he depends on us. Now we know best.

TRISH

I don't think like that.

ANN

Maybe you don't say it, but the thought must cross your mind.

TRISH

You don't know.

ANN

Hello? I'm your sister. I was there too, remember? All those years. You and me, under his big, government-issued thumb.

TRISH

You're exaggerating.

ANN

Let's see: Who picked our friends, picked our books and TV shows, picked our clothes? Who drove our boyfriends away?

TRISH

It wasn't that bad.

ANN

Not for me--I checked out after Momma died. You're still living in his house.

TRISH

I have to keep it ready for him. For when he comes home.

ANN

Good news: He's not coming home. You'll never see his commanding presence in your doorway again.

TRISH

You make it sound like abuse. He never abused us. He just had strict ideas for raising us, and no wonder. First he was military. Then he worked for the Internal Revenue Service. He lived by rules all his life.

ANN

Can I tell you how tired I am of his goddam rules?

TRISH

*(Quietly.)*

May I.

ANN

Huh?

TRISH

"May I tell you how tired I am." Can is ability--

TRISH (CONT'D)

*(Earnestly.)*

--may is permission.

ANN

*(Sarcastically.)*

--may is permission...

ANN (CONT'D)

...I know, I know. See, after all this time you quote him without even thinking about it. Can I, may I--one rule after another, day after day.

TRISH

He only wanted us to speak well and act properly. You don't have to be so bitter about it.

ANN

Bitter, hell. I'm triumphant. It's why I come here. To deliver all the scandalous news about my twisted world. To say whatever I want without his disapproval.

*(Spoonng vigorously.)*

Latest boyfriend: tattoo artist. Latest vacation: cruising Key West. Latest job: Planned Parenthood. Latest protest: the war. Everything the opposite of him. Only thing is now he's a completely receptive audience--the new Cap'n Daddy, who finally has nothing bad to say to me.

TRISH

He was trying to do right. He wanted the best for us.

ANN

He wanted what was best for himself, for his image of the Perfectly Trained Family he could show off to the world.

TRISH

You're kicking him while he's down.

ANN

Uh-uh, just spending my two cents. Stubborn as he is, the Captain'll probably burn through our inheritance in here. At least I'll get my money's worth by saying what I want whether he can hear it or not. Call it therapy.

TRISH

Well, I'd therapize about your hostility, if I were you. You sound obsessed.

ANN

Better obsessed than repressed.

TRISH

I'm not.

ANN

Then maybe you can explain why you never left home? Where's your life?

TRISH

I get out.

ANN

To a third-rate diner, where you wait tables.

TRISH

It's a supper club.

ANN

It's not much of a club if anybody can walk in off the street in their dirty work clothes.

TRISH

Why're you picking on me? You criticize Daddy for telling me what to do and you're doing the same thing. I'm supporting myself. I have my own way of doing things, all right?

ANN

Yeah. All right. Why should I care.

*ANN begins roughly wiping food debris from the CAPTAIN's face and shirt.*

ANN (CONT'D)

It's just...you should get out more. How about we go somewhere for dinner, just the two of us?

TRISH

I spend enough time in a restaurant.



ANN

Doesn't have to be a restaurant. We can eat at my place.

TRISH

I'm busy.

ANN

Yeah, that's what it sounds like.

*(Taunting her under the guise of being playful.)*

You should get a tattoo, you know that?

TRISH

I'll think about it.

ANN

*(Taps TRISH's butt.)*

Right here--Kick Me.

TRISH

You'd like that.

ANN

Just don't come crying to me, you end up like him.

TRISH

How's that?

ANN

*(Shivers.)*

Frozen in time.

TRISH

I won't. Don't worry about me.

*TRISH and ANN suddenly look at each other, then turn to the wheelchair.*

ANN

Oh, Christ, he messed himself again. See what I told you about that restaurant food. But would you listen? No.

TRISH

He hardly ate any.

ANN

Wouldn't be surprised he did it on purpose. I always told you he was full of shit.

TRISH

I don't like to hear you talk like that.

ANN

So I'll leave. Don't worry, I'll stop at the desk, tell them to send somebody to clean him up.

TRISH

I'll wait here with him.

ANN

Suit yourself. I've had enough.

TRISH

I want to. Stay with him.

ANN

Luckily I been cured of that.

TRISH

I'm all right, you know. I maybe don't live like you, but I'm all right.

ANN

Sure. You and the Captain here.

TRISH

I thought you were leaving.

ANN

Yeah.

*(Beat.)*

So long, Capt'n. See you next week.

*ANN hugs CAPTAIN perfunctorily, exits.*

TRISH

Don't be angry, Daddy. She doesn't mean it. We love you. I think of you all the time. Just the other day, for instance. Bet you can guess why.

*(Beat, trying to be bubbly.)*

Come on--May 10, that's the clue. My restaurant job? Forty-seventy?

*(Beat, leaning to look him in the eye.)*

I can see you know what I mean. IRS Form forty-seventy, Employee's Report of Tips to Employer, due on the tenth day of the month following the month that you receive them. I don't have to tell an old taxman that.

*(Beat.)*

You know, Daddy, every time I fill out that forty-seventy, I report my tips to the exact penny. You always taught us honesty is the best policy. That's what the military and the IRS taught you, and that's what I believe. Every single penny reported to my employer and the federal government on the tenth of every single month, as the law requires.

*(Beat.)*

(MORE)

## TRISH (CONT'D)

Except that, out of all the people who wait tables at Marco's, I'm the only one who tells the truth about my tips. Everyone else lies, and Marco lets them. They report a flat eight percent of sales and instead I admit 10, 15, 20 percent, whatever I really got. First they teased me for being honest. Now they say my over-reporting is going to get them audited. But it's not over-reporting. It's the truth. I won't lie. You taught me that.

*(Beat, a single sob into her napkin.)*

They think I'm such a chump.

*(Recovers with the help of her notes.)*

I need to tell you something, Daddy, and I don't want you to be upset.

*(Beat.)*

Remember that man I told you about? His name's Michael. I got it off his debit card. You remember I said he came in for lunch a few days a month? Well, since that time he smiled at me, he's come for lunch every day. And he keeps smiling.

*(Beat.)*

I'm going to smile back at him, Daddy. Tomorrow. And if he talks to me--about something other than what's on my forty-seventy, I mean--I'm going to be friendly to him.

*(Beat.)*

What you need to know, Daddy, is that there's something about Michael you wouldn't like. I'm not going to say what it is because it shouldn't be important. It's important to you, I know, but I always suspected different. I'm sure there's nothing wrong with people like Michael. They're just like you and me inside, maybe even better. I expect so at any rate, and I'm going to find out.

*(Beat.)*

So there. That's my news. I guess Ann's not the only one who knows how to disappoint you.

*TRISH goes to the door and looks out.*

## TRISH (CONT'D)

Doesn't look like anyone's coming. Or Ann forgot to tell them to.

*(Beat, approaching CAPTAIN carefully.)*

I can't leave you like this, Daddy.

*(Beat.)*

I'll put some clean clothes on you if you let me.

*(Beat.)*

What do you think? Clean you up?

*(Beat.)*

Can I, Captain?...May I?

THE END