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CHARACTERS

MR. VANACKER, 72. Used to be the owner of a grocery store and was always a very active volunteer in his town. He suffers from lung disease, relies on oxygen. He can't move without his electric wheelchair but is convinced his condition will improve soon and he'll be able to go back to his former life.

MRS. BLEECKER, in her 90s. She used to work as a bookkeeper in the very famous restaurant Lion d'Or owned by the also very famous singer Lou Bandy. She was married to Herman -a Chef at the Lion d'Or- who died a year ago. She used to be a part of the well-to-do, can't get used to the people around her now.

MRS. KRAMER, turns 90 in the play. She thinks she still lives in her little house on the dike where she's lived since she got married. Her son Jacob died at a very young age in a motorbike accident. It's very difficult for her to understand why she is surrounded by other people.

MR. VAN DYCK, in his 80s. The taciturn type. He's married, has a couple of grown-up children. He used to work in a cheese factory but would have preferred to have been a teacher. He's becoming increasingly aware that he's not the type of man he thought he was.

JUDITH, in her 20s. A nurse.

1. SPRING

It's dark. We hear the sound of a helicopter and the voice of a David Attenborough-like host. During the voice-over, lights fade up.

TV HOST It's a wonderful region and what a marvelous view from up here! Vast forests, large expanses of water... This landscape has been like this for millions of years and it will stay like this for at least another million years except for the cycle of the seasons. Sweltering hot summers, every year, followed by grey falls with endless rain... Winters, when nature appears to stand still, slowly gathering its strength... Then spring with the outburst of flowers, the rutting growl of animals, the feverish building of nests, the digging of dens... New life emerges everywhere, eyes squinting in the light, because the sun can be really bright here.

The recreation room of a nursing home. Clinical atmosphere. The curtains are drawn. Mr. Vanacker, Mrs. Kramer and Mr. Van Dyck sit or sleep. They hum a children's song, very softly. The volume goes up and down. They sing in perfect unison. Mr. Vanacker sits in an electric wheelchair- a hi-tech contraption with headlights and blinkers. When he goes backwards the wheelchair beeps like a truck backing up. He's holding the remote control of the TV set. Mr. Van Dyck is sitting at a table, oblivious to what's happening in the room. He will hardly move during this scene. Mrs. Kramer sits on the seat of her walker, sleeping. Mrs. Bleecker, in a wheelchair, is wheeled on stage by nurse Judith. Mrs. Bleecker wears pajamas. Her eyes are tightly shut. Judith opens the curtains. Sunlight fills the room. Mr. Vanacker is startled. He flips to another channel.

MRS. BLEECKER *upset* I can't do anything around here. *to Judith* Who asked you to do this? Everybody sleeps whenever they want! Everybody does whatever they want. But I can't do a thing! I can't do a single thing!

Mr. VANACKER *tries to flip the channel but he only manages to increase the volume.*

JUDITH *loud* Could you turn it down a little?

MRS. BLEECKER I'm the only one who pays her way around here yet they keep dragging me out of bed. Show me the rule that says I have to be here. I want to see that rule on paper! I have the right to do exactly what I want and you should know that...

JUDITH You better sit down now.

MRS. BLEECKER No, I won't! *She walks to the door, wanting to leave but the door is locked.*

JUDITH Mrs. Bleecker...

MRS. BLEECKER What now!

JUDITH That door's locked.

MRS. BLEECKER Then you better open it real pronto, dear!

Mr. Vanacker presses a button on the remote.

TV HOST In paradise, people cannot do everything they want. But they don't want to do everything, so they can do anything.

MRS. BLEECKER Lord, what garbage.

JUDITH Can you turn it down?

Mr. Vanacker presses another button. Gun shots.

Mrs. Kramer wakes up. Judith grabs the remote and turns the volume down.

MRS. BLEECKER For God's sake!

MRS. KRAMER The Germans shut down the power-

JUDITH Good morning, Mrs. Kramer.

MRS. KRAMER The doctor had to park his motorbike in front of the window to light the room. That was when my third son was born, just a week ago. Just about a week ago.

MRS. BLEECKER Sixty years ago. At least sixty years!

MRS. KRAMER You could hear the little thing wailing over the roar of the engine. What a way to enter the world.

MRS. BLEECKER My God, what garbage!

MRS. KRAMER Other than that, we're not so troubled by the war. All the men have been sent to work in Germany so there's a great demand for boots and coats. Business is better than ever!

MRS. BLEECKER I'm the only sane person around here.

MRS. KRAMER The mailman is being sent to Germany too. They've asked Jacob to take over his

job. "Don't hesitate," I said to Jacob. "Sign the contract right away. We can use the income." For most people, these are bad times but we're doing much better.

MRS. BLEECKER Could you be quiet please!

MRS. KRAMER I shouldn't be glad there's a war on but I can't help it.

JUDITH Good morning, Mrs. Kramer.

MRS. KRAMER Good morning to you, sweetheart. Don't you have to go to school?

JUDITH How are you doing today?

MRS. BLEECKER Not well. Even worse than yesterday and yesterday I felt terrible.

JUDITH I was talking to Mrs. Kramer.

MRS. BLEECKER And I was talking to you, dear.

MRS. KRAMER I'm Mrs. Kramer.

JUDITH Why don't you sit for a moment?

MRS. BLEECKER I'm not feeling well, didn't you hear?

MRS. KRAMER I'm Mrs. Kramer.

JUDITH Well, Mrs. Kramer...

MRS. BLEECKER They just won't listen!

JUDITH *to Mrs. Kramer* It's a lovely sunshiny day!

MRS. BLEECKER I hate lovely sunshiny days.

JUDITH Would you prefer a rainy day?

MRS. BLEECKER What a stupid question!

MRS. KRAMER I am Mrs. Kramer.

MRS. BLEECKER And close the curtains, for God's sake. The sun is blinding me!

JUDITH Oh, come on. Everything is fine.

MRS. BLEECKER No, it's only getting worse. And if you can't deal with that, you'd better find yourself another job!

JUDITH sighs.

MRS. BLEECKER And if you don't want answers, you shouldn't ask so many questions. Pass that on to the management! Since Herman died my life has been hell. They can't do anything right around here. Pass that on to the management!

JUDITH Listen to me...

MRS. BLEECKER No, I won't! And as for your so-called Music and Song program, that's a huge waste of time. You call those musicians professionals? They sound like music school dropouts. I bet you can't tell the difference but some people have an ear for music. I worked in

Lou Bandy's place for years. I listened to his songs night after night. I know what good music sounds like. But the people here all think it's wonderful. You should see them. Clapping out of rhythm, singing out of tune. It's so embarrassing. They have no sense of shame anymore. Pass that on to the management. It's all so tasteless!

Judith moves towards Mrs. Bleecker.

MRS. BLEECKER Don't you touch me!

JUDITH You can't walk around in your pajamas all day.

MRS. BLEECKER I don't see why not.

JUDITH Nobody wears pajamas all day.

MRS. BLEECKER Has anyone ever tried?

JUDITH That's not the point.

MRS. BLEECKER That's exactly the point and you should know it!

Judith moves towards Mrs. Bleecker.

MRS. BLEECKER Don't you touch me! I'm warning you for the last time!

JUDITH You didn't use to wear pajamas all day, did you?

MRS. BLEECKER They always want to have the last word! Do you think an accountant would walk around in her pajamas all day?

JUDITH That's exactly what I mean.

MRS. BLEECKER And am I still an accountant?

That's exactly what I mean. So please, let me go back to bed. It won't bother anyone and the day will pass much more smoothly. I am perfectly capable to decide- This place is terribly overpriced. It's more expensive than a hotel, and for what? Nothing. No service at all. If I were you, I'd be ashamed of myself! In the hotel business, you would have gone bankrupt years ago. Pass that on to the management! Or am I the only sane person around here?

JUDITH Mrs. Bleecker...

MRS. BLEECKER Just unlock that door. I don't want to have to deal with other people all the time. I'm too old for that. Did you hear me? I asked you to unlock the door! Did you hear me? *Pause* You see, that's the way to shut them up. Just use proper arguments and eventually they see the light. *She looks around, sees Judith leaving*

the room. Typical! When she can't win, she runs away.

MR. VANACKER *to Judith* How did I end up here? At this moment I mean...

Mrs. Bleecker follows Judith as fast as she can but when she reaches the door, it has already closed.

MR. VANACKER I wouldn't mind finding out about that.

Pause

Mrs. Bleecker tries to open the door, goes back to her wheelchair.

MRS. BLEECKER I'm the only sane person around here.

Silence

Mrs. Bleecker discovers a stain on her sleeve, tries to clean it with a handkerchief. Mr. Van Dyck gets up. He walks towards Mrs. Bleecker, hesitates, walks back to get a badminton racket, walks towards Mrs. Bleecker again. Mr. Vanacker coughs.

MRS. KRAMER Oh, no. They won't put me in an old people's home...

MRS. BLEECKER Oh, shut up. *She takes out a crossword puzzle.*

MRS. KRAMER It would make me feel like a caged rabbit.

MRS. BLEECKER My God, what garbage. *She notices Mr. Van Dyck. He's standing next to her, offering her the racket. What's the matter with you?*

MR. VAN DYCK I thought...

MRS. BLEECKER Don't be ridiculous.

Mr. Van Dyck returns to his seat. Mr. Vanacker coughs.

MRS. KRAMER I did ask the doctor, not too long ago. "Shouldn't I be under some form of treatment?" "Are you kidding," he said. "You're healthy as a horse." So I guess I've escaped that one.

MRS. BLEECKER Good God.

MRS. KRAMER Oh, no. They won't put me with those senior citizens who keep repeating the same thing over and over again. That's how senior citizens are. They tell you fifty times a day how terribly they miss their kids. Oh no. I am fine here. I'm doing well.

MRS. BLEECKER Little space. Three-letter word.

Mr. Vanacker flips to another channel.

TV SOUND *male voice* I'm glad to be free from desire. I feel like i've escaped a cruel and savage master.

MRS. BLEECKER Oh, shut up.

TV SOUND *female voice* Peace and freedom is the privilege of age.

MRS. BLEECKER Turn that thing down! Please! Turn it down!

MR. VANACKER When does the tennis start?

MRS. BLEECKER How should I know.

MRS. KRAMER I'm sorry.

MRS. BLEECKER *imitates her* I'm sorry?

MR. VANACKER *to Mrs. Kramer* When does the tennis start?

MRS. KRAMER I have no idea.

MRS. BLEECKER If you could turn it down, please.

MRS. KRAMER I'm sorry?

MRS. BLEECKER I'm sorry?

Mr. Vanacker presses a button, the volume goes up.

MRS. BLEECKER Can't you do anything right? *shouting* I am asking you to...

MR. VANACKER finds the right button.

MRS. BLEECKER Good God!

Pause

MRS. BLEECKER *discovers she is wearing pajamas* I really don't... They leave us in our pajamas all day. See? They just put us in a chair and forget about us. It's outrageous. It's absolutely scandalous. I need to... I must immediately- Uhm, is there anywhere I could be alone for a while?

MR. VAN DYCK You could go to your room...

MRS. BLEECKER Oh, shut up! *She doesn't know where to go, sits down again.* Thank God I've always been so particular about my sleepwear! Even in bed, one needs to cut a good figure. Even in bed- For instance, do you have any idea what I paid for this nightgown? See? They have no idea. You wouldn't believe how much bad taste there is around here. *She shows off her nightgown.* I bought this at Block's Fashion House in Haarlem. They know my size at Blocks. I've been the same size for sixty years. "Please tell us your secret, Mrs. Bleecker." "Shall I tell you my secret? There is no secret!" Ha! *She lifts her leg.* Here. Ninety-two. See what I mean? I am

blessed with this body. I... *She gets up, doesn't know where to go.* For as long as I can remember, I've been buying my clothes at Block's Fashion House in Haarlem. But when I came here, they took away all my clothes. Three closets full of coats, shoes, hats, gowns- all gone. They should be ashamed!

MR. VAN DYCK Maybe they put them in your closet.

MRS. BLEECKER That's none of your business!

MR. VAN DYCK You should ask if you can take a look.

MRS. BLEECKER I'm not going to ask if I can look in my own closet. That would really be going too far!

MR. VAN DYCK Would you like me to ask for you?

MRS. BLEECKER Don't even think about it!

Mr. Van Dyck presses the button of the intercom. We hear a buzzer.

MRS. BLEECKER What's that!

MRS. KRAMER Come in, the door is open!

MR. VANACKER That's the buzzer.

MRS. BLEECKER I'm the only sane person around here.

Judith enters.

MR. VAN DYCK She would like to take a look in her closet.

MRS. BLEECKER Oh, shut up. *to Judith* They've left me in my pajamas.

JUDITH Oh, what a shame!

MRS. BLEECKER One of them has something against me. She sits me in a chair in my pajamas and then disappears.

JUDITH I'll come along with you.

MR. VANACKER *to Judith* Excuse me...

Judith takes Mrs. Bleecker's arm.

MRS. BLEECKER Thank you so much, dear.

MR. VANACKER *to Judith* How did I end up here. At this moment I mean...

Judith doesn't hear him, exits.

MR. VANACKER I wouldn't mind finding out about that.

Silence

Mr. Vanacker coughs.

MRS. KRAMER Oh no, they won't put me in an old people's home.

Pause

Mr. Vanacker flips to another channel. We hear a tennis game.

MR. VANACKER One day I'm going to be a professional tennis player! They hit a tennis ball with such force, it's incredible. There are no limits. That's what those guys are showing us. Man can always go higher or faster. I cheer up every time I see a record being broken or an amazing pass. There are no limits. We've even been on the moon. All our neighbors came over to watch. We had the first TV set on the block. When new inventions come out, I'm always the first to get them. Hi-fi stereos, CD players, VCRs... I buy them before everyone else. Imagine! Fondue. We were eating it and nobody had even heard of the word. People would walk by our window twice, three times, just to see what we were doing. Man can do anything, that's a fact. Twenty years ago, if doctors had known as much as they do now, my father would have lived to be eighty. I would have had two more brothers and sisters, at least! I'm an optimist by nature. Medical science is progressing so rapidly. You never know when doctors will pop into your room with a brand new medication. And a day later, I'll be zooming around town again, busy organizing some fundraising event. I was on the board of the children's playground for years. I was on the board of the choir, on the board of the steering committee. I was on the board of the Farmers Credit Union, which was bought out by Rabobank. Chairing a meeting, that's fantastic. Presiding. "You do this, you do that." And I supervise. It's all about delegating, you know. Sharing responsibility. When I get better, I'll take it up again. They can't wait for me to come back. "We don't know what to do without you, Vanacker. The community is a mess." Don't worry, folks. Scientists are making huge leaps. They're in the labs day and night. Look out there, there are lights in every window. I must hold on. That's the most important thing. At any moment a doctor can pop into the room with a brand new medication. "We found something, Vanacker. Forget the oxygen tank, just take this little pill and you'll go on forever." Really, it's happened

before. All sorts of diseases were thought to be incurable and then...

Silence

Mr. Vanacker watches television. Mr. Van Dyck looks straight ahead. Suddenly, in a flowerpot next to Mrs. Kramer, flowers sprout and bloom.

MRS. KRAMER It's springtime again!

Flowers appear everywhere. Snowdrops, crocuses, daffodils. The sounds of birds. Mrs. Kramer gets up. Spotlight on Mrs. Kramer.

MRS. KRAMER I'm uh... *She looks at the others, then at the flowers.* Flowers coming up right before our eyes! I saw them spring up between the green blades of grass before anybody noticed. First the snowdrops-every year the first to emerge. Crocuses next and daffodils at the end, their yellow trumpets clamoring above everything: "Spring is coming, can't you see that spring has just begun!" I'm the only one who notices. The ladies next door are far too busy. They bike pass my window, their coats flapping, plastic bags dangling from their handle bars. Sometimes they wave as they go by but most of the time, they look straight ahead, lost in their own thoughts. They make shopping lists inside their heads, have imaginary discussions with their doctors. The mind can be so full of worries, oh my. But I don't have that problem anymore. I haven't been a mother for ages. I haven't been a mother for a long, long time. For a long, long time. Look at them struggling against the wind across the dike... There's still so much ahead of them... I get tired just looking at them. Wind-blown hair, sleep-deprived... These ladies used to be such beautiful girls. Every one of them, gorgeous. Not that long ago. Not even that long...

2. SUMMER

In the recreation room. Upstage is a huge bed of sunflowers, as if nature was encroaching on the room. Wonderful weather, blue skies. Mrs. Kramer hangs laundry on a clothes' line. Judith stands next to her, holding a basket full of clothes. The laundry flaps in the wind. Mr. Van Dyck and Mrs. Bleecker play badminton. Mr. Van Dyck wears shorts and no shirt. He shouts "Wham!" every time he hits the birdie. Mrs. Bleecker laughs. She is wearing a beautiful, fancy summer dress. Romantic music, sounds of birds. Mr. Vanacker watches from behind his sunglasses. Balloons are tied to Mrs. Kramer' walker. It's her birthday.

MR. VAN DYCK Wham! It's a wonderful day, folks!
The sun shines bright in my old Kentucky home!

MRS. BLEECKER My, you're a real pro!

MR. VAN DYCK I can beat them all. Even if
they're younger.

MRS. BLEECKER I rarely see men your age as vital
as you!

MR. VAN DYCK *shouts* Wham! I just stay in shape,
that's my secret. Every morning I jog to the
lake...

MRS. BLEECKER He jogs to the lake and swims.

MR. VAN DYCK Rain or shine, I swim!

MRS. BLEECKER You're amazing! *She kisses him.*

MR. VAN DYCK You're my girlfriend!

MR. VANACKER Unbelievable.

Judith brings Mrs. Kramer back to her walker. Mr. Van Dyck and Mrs. Bleecker keep playing. Mr. Van Dyck hits the birdie.

MR. VAN DYCK Wham! Isn't it great to be alive!
As far as I'm concerned, it should be summer
forever. The sun shines and shines and shines...
Wham! I've never played badminton in my life but
now I'm playing badminton!

MRS. BLEECKER You're quite a character, you
know!

MR. VAN DYCK I certainly am. I didn't use to
walk around in shorts or sandals, oh no. When I
came home from work I would go directly to the
bathroom, take a shower, part my hair in a
straight line and put on a suit. I never wore
casual clothes. Oh no. Hair parted in a straight
line and a jacket. That was me. Even when I

worked in the garden or during the holidays. My wife didn't like the feeling of sand between her toes. So what do you do when that happens, Vanacker?

MR. VANACKER I uhm...

MR. VAN DYCK You just stay in a good hotel, that's what you do! *to Judith* Let me know if you want the lawn mowed. *to Mrs. Bleecker* Nothing like spending the morning pushing a roaring lawn mower. I'd loved to go camping one day.

Mrs. Bleecker falls backwards.

MR. VANACKER Wham!

MR. VAN DYCK *gets his camera and takes a picture* Look at her in her summer dress!

MRS. BLEECKER Peter. Don't do that! Ha, ha!

MR. VAN DYCK She can absolutely pull it off!

MRS. BLEECKER Don't take a picture!

Mr. Van Dyck tries to help her stand up.

MRS. BLEECKER Just so we're clear, Herman was my husband and you're my friend. Let there be no mistake about that.

Mr. Van Dyck takes her back to her wheelchair. One of the balloons tied to Mrs. Kramer chair 'explodes'.

MRS. KRAMER Whaaa!

MR. VAN DYCK Wham! Ha, ha, ha!

JUDITH *to Mrs. Kramer* It was only a balloon!

MRS. KRAMER This is too much!

JUDITH *sings* Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you...

MRS. KRAMER I would like to go home now, dear.

JUDITH & MR. VAN DYCK *sing* Happy birthday, happy birthday, happy birthday to you! It's a wonderful day, people.

Judith gives Mrs. Kramer a present.

MRS. KRAMER What's that?

JUDITH Happy birthday, Mrs. Kramer!

MRS. KRAMER Well, thank you very much...

JUDITH Your daughter sent you a present! *She walks to Mrs. Bleecker carrying a plate with two big cakes on it.* Would you like a piece of birthday cake, Mrs. Bleecker?

MRS. BLEECKER I don't remember asking for cake.

JUDITH Would you prefer a piece of cheesecake?

MRS. BLEECKER Please. No. No cheesecake for me.

JUDITH But you love birthday cake, don't you?

MRS. BLEECKER Yes, I do.

JUDITH So I'll give you a nice piece of birthday cake, okay? *She gives her a piece of cake.*

MRS. BLEECKER Don't even think of it!

JUDITH But-

MRS. BLEECKER Did I ask for a piece of birthday cake? No, I didn't!

MR. VAN DYCK *laughing* This woman is so self-possessed, it's amazing!

JUDITH *to Mr. Van Dyck* She used to love birthday cake!

MRS. BLEECKER She can say whatever she wants, that doesn't make it true.

MR. VAN DYCK *to Judith* I love all those moods of hers! It's fantastic!

MRS. BLEECKER *naughtily* Oh, shut up.
Judith gives Mr. Vanacker a piece of cake.

MR. VANACKER Is it your birthday today, Your Honor?

MRS. BLEECKER I'm the only sane person around here.

JUDITH *laughs* What did you call me?

MR. VANACKER *laughs* Oh yeah, oh yeah.

JUDITH Did you call me Your Honor?

MR. VANACKER Oh yeah, oh yeah.

JUDITH It's Mrs. Kramer' birthday today! She's ninety today.

MRS. BLEECKER You shouldn't say things like that in a lady's presence.

MRS. KRAMER I'm nineteen today?

MRS. BLEECKER My god, what garbage.

JUDITH *shouts* You're turning ninety today!

MRS. BLEECKER How rude! They're broadcasting your age all over the place!

MRS. KRAMER *points at Judith* We've been friends since grade school!

MRS. BLEECKER And they forgot to offer me a piece of my own birthday cake!

MR. VAN DYCK Would you like a piece of cake? *He gets up.*

MRS. BLEECKER What do you think? It's my birthday, for God's sake.
Mr. Van Dyck gets her a piece of cake.

MR. VANACKER Today is your birthday, too?

MRS. BLEECKER Of course, it's my birthday!

JUDITH *to Mr. Vanacker* Mrs. Kramer is celebrating her birthday today.

MRS. KRAMER I'm Mrs. Kramer.
MRS. BLEECKER That woman thinks I can't remember my own birthday.
JUDITH *to Mr. Vanacker* Mrs. Kramer turned ninety today.
Mr. Van Dyck gives Mrs. Bleecker a piece of cake.
MR. VAN DYCK My God, this is the life. Aren't we lucky to be around?
He offers Mrs. Bleecker a piece of cake.
dubbelop? zie 2 regels verder boven
MRS. BLEECKER You're such a considerate person!
MR. VAN DYCK I sure am!
MRS. BLEECKER You're a real gentleman. That at my age I get to meet a man who is able to knot his tie correctly is a wonderful thing. Herman knew how to knot his tie. Herman was a gentleman.
MR. VAN DYCK You're my girlfriend.
MRS. BLEECKER Just to be clear, Herman is my late husband. And this is my friend. He's a real gentleman. Someone you're not ashamed to take out to dinner.
Mrs. Kramer has unwrapped the present.
JUDITH Do you like it?
MRS. KRAMER It's a nice book but what am I supposed to do with it? *She puts the album on a side-table. Judith picks it up, shows it to Mrs. Kramer.*
JUDITH Look, these are your family pictures.
MRS. KRAMER Oh, that's right.
Judith points to a picture.
JUDITH Isn't this cute?
MRS. KRAMER I'd like to go home now, dear.
JUDITH Look. Do you remember this trip to the beach? Your son was still a baby then.
MRS. KRAMER *doesn't look at the picture.* I see. It's really beautiful, darling, but you need to go to bed now. It's late.
JUDITH Here, that's you.
MRS. KRAMER That's me?
JUDITH Do you remember?
MRS. KRAMER What was I doing there?
JUDITH You were at your daughter's wedding, I guess. Look.
MRS. KRAMER *stares at Judith* But I am looking, dear.
JUDITH Do you remember?
MRS. BLEECKER We might as well not be here.

JUDITH Do you remember?
MRS. KRAMER I'm sorry but this means nothing to me.
MRS. BLEECKER They ignore you on your birthday and on top of that, they're eating your whole cake!
Mrs. Kramer starts crying.
JUDITH Oh, dear!
Judith tries to put her arm around Mrs. Kramer. .
MRS. KRAMER *hides her tears* It's nothing, sweetheart. *She pulls a handkerchief from her sleeve. She wipes her tears.* See? Mommy is laughing again!

Mrs. Bleecker takes the photo album.
JUDITH Please, give that back!
MRS. KRAMER Stop arguing, girls!
MRS. BLEECKER Oh, shut up! It's my birthday present.
MRS. KRAMER Gosh. Today is your birthday?
MRS. BLEECKER I'm turning ninety-two today!
MRS. KRAMER I'm ninety.
JUDITH Can I have the album back?
Lights change. Spotlight on Mr. Vanacker. Judith stands behind a microphone. She lipsyncs to the Mayor's voice.
JUDITH/MAYOR'S VOICE But anyhow. Ladies and gentlemen...
Mr. Vanacker is startled, his mouth is full of cake.
MR. VANACKER Oh sorry, I've already started...
Applause, shouts.
JUDITH/MAYOR'S VOICE Dear Dirk. You must be surprised to find yourself surrounded by so many friends today. I have to say, your wife can keep a secret.
MR. VANACKER I guess so...
Laughter, applause.
JUDITH/MAYOR'S VOICE Dear family and friends! We're all doing our best to improve life in our beautiful town. Everybody is contributing. But some contributions are so great that they become indispensable. Dirk Vanacker, you're one of those indispensable men. You're an invaluable leader in our community...
MR. VANACKER Well, I uhm...

JUDITH/MAYOR'S VOICE No need to be modest.
Some people are just natural leaders. And in our
town, our most treasured leader is none other
than you, Dirk. We all recognize that.

Applause. A brass band starts to play.

JUDITH/MAYOR'S VOICE So dear Dirk, dear
family, friends... As Mayor of this town, I am
honored to present you... *She opens a little box
with a medal in it.*

MR. VANACKER This can't be true!

JUDITH/MAYOR'S VOICE It really is, Dirk!

MR. VANACKER *elated* That's wonderful!

*Judith puts the medal on his lapel. Mr. Vanacker
grabs the microphone and looks at the audience.
Spotlight on Mr. Vanacker.*

MR. VANACKER You're probably thinking: "My God,
there's Dirk Vanacker again. Can't he ever stop
talking?" And you're right, ladies and gentlemen.
I always feel the need to say something. I can't
help it. *Laughter and applause. He looks at the
audience.* Moments like these are so incredibly
wonderful. All of us together, I mean that's
increasingly rare and I think it's a shame,
folks, a real shame.

Pause

Oh my God. Do you remember the renovation of the
community centre after the big November storm,
back in the seventies? I can still picture us
standing on the roof- which had a lot of asbestos
in it- but what did we know, everything was full
of asbestos in those days. We fixed the entire
roof in one day! We felt so strong! Do you
remember how proud we were at the end of the day?
A brand new roof with a flag flapping on top.
Because, ladies and gentlemen, what's more
important than coming together to build and
rebuild? And afterwards, a big barbecue in the
vicar's garden or an afternoon drink in Paul'
café... Ah man, I'm not old at all. Seventy-two,
that's nothing! There's so much left to do. So
many people I used to see day after day and never
really talked to... It's such a shame...

*Lights change. Mr. Vanacker remains standing. The
others are sitting in their chairs. Mrs. Bleecker
leafs through Mrs. Kramer' album. Mr. Van Dyck
sits next to her. Mrs. Bleecker shows him
pictures.*

MRS. BLEECKER See? Lou Bandy, the famous singer. I used to do the bookkeeping at the Lion d'Or, Lou Bandy's place. A three-star restaurant with four-star entertainment every night. *She points to a picture.* See? That's me!

MR. VAN DYCK This lady is magnificent. This lady, folks, this lady! *He sits down, lights a cigar.* Ain't life grand! *He smokes his cigar.*

MRS. BLEECKER You're such a character!

MR. VAN DYCK I certainly am!

MRS. BLEECKER Lou was so thrilled to have found the love of his life. Again. See? How happy they seem?

MR. VAN DYCK That's what love does to people.

MRS. BLEECKER She was thirty years his junior, just a high school girl. "It will never last," we used to say at the Lion d'Or. I was already in love with Herman at that time. But I hadn't dared think about marriage. Except if Lou could start a new relationship at 59... I mean if he could get a young girl, why couldn't I start something with a widower my own age?

MR. VAN DYCK Uh-huh.

JUDITH *walks to Mr. Vanacker who is still standing in the middle of the room* What's the matter, Mr. Vanacker?

MR. VANACKER *moved* I didn't expect it.

JUDITH What do you mean?

Mr. Vanacker is confused, inspects the lapels of his jacket. There's no medal.

MR. VANACKER They're going to give me a medal soon.

JUDITH Is that so?

MR. VANACKER They're working on it. It's all happening behind the scene, you know, sort of top-secret. *He grabs her by her arm.* So I can't say anything more.

JUDITH Of course.

MR. VANACKER You see, I used to be a grocer. But chairing meetings, that's my main interest. "You do this, you do that." And I supervise. It's all about uhm... you know, delegating... *as if starting a speech* Ladies and gentlemen!

MRS. BLEECKER God help us.

MR. VANACKER My name is... My name is... *He searches his pockets, finds a name tag.* Ah!

He sticks the tag on his lapel. Excuse me, do you know who I am?

MRS. KRAMER *reads the name on the tag* You're Dirk Vanacker.

MR. VANACKER *reads his name* You see, I'm Dirk Vanacker. Everybody knows who I am.

JUDITH That's wonderful.

Judith leaves the room.

MR. VANACKER How did I end up here. I mean...

Pause

Mrs. Bleecker and Mr. Van Dyck are still looking at the album.

MRS. BLEECKER And this is Herman. He was the Chef at Lou's. The reputation of the Lion D'Or is entirely due to Herman. *She points to a picture.* Herman would sneak into my office at the end of the day with a plate of fresh pastries. When I brought him home, my father was speechless and my mother cried. They never thought I'd find a husband at age 40. And so suddenly, I became a mother of four.

MRS. KRAMER What a story!

MRS. BLEECKER What do you mean?

MRS. KRAMER *confused* I don't know.

MRS. BLEECKER We danced at the company's fifth anniversary party. *She shows Mr. Van Dyck a picture.* See? Lou Bandy, on stage, singing of course. Isn't this an amazing picture? Herman and me on the dance floor. *Lou Bandy's music is heard in the distance.* Look at their faces. They had never seen a couple dance like us! We weren't just dancing, we were floating, we were gliding on the dance-floor. *Music grows louder.* We weren't dancing, we were flying! It's true. We were flying around the room!

Mr. Van Dyck takes Mrs. Bleecker's hands. They dance to Lou Bandy's music. After a while, Mr. Van Dyck becomes exhausted. He grabs his chest.

MR. VAN DYCK It's just, you know, I mean no need to panic, I mean, it's just uhm...

He notices he's only wearing shorts. The music changes. Lights change. Very slowly, Mr. Van Dyck puts on his clothes while he and Mrs. Bleecker watch each other closely. It's like a striptease in reverse.

MR. VAN DYCK *puts on his trousers* Wham... *He puts on his shirt.* Wham... *He puts on his jacket.*

Wham... *He kneels down besides Mrs. Bleecker. My name is Peter van Dyck . I'm an easy-going guy. He takes off Mrs. Bleecker's shoes.*

MRS. BLEECKER What are you doing?

MR. VAN DYCK I thought you might like a foot bath.

MRS. BLEECKER Oh no, thank you.

He takes off her socks.

MR. VAN DYCK You've got such wonderful feet.

MRS. BLEECKER *shows him her feet* You think?

MR. VAN DYCK Sound feet. No corns, no hammer toes- these are a little girl's feet! *He puts her feet into the little bath. She relaxes.*

MRS. BLEECKER It's all about proper footwear. I've always worn Dungelman shoes. That makes a difference. Proper footwear keeps one going.

MR. VAN DYCK It's all about keeping up, you know. I'm still doing sports. Every day I jog to the lake.

MRS. BLEECKER And he swims.

MR. VAN DYCK Rain or shine, I swim.

Sounds of birds. Mrs. Kramer puts her feet in a little bath. Mr. Vanacker turns on a small fan, enjoys the fresh air.

Silence

Mr. Van Dyck puts his feet in Mrs. Bleecker's bath. Everybody relaxes.

Very long silence

MRS. BLEECKER When it rained, we used to dance in the puddles.

MRS. KRAMER We all used to dance in the puddles. We would stomp through the water after a thunderstorm. That's what life is about when you're young, isn't it? It's all about dancing and singing.

MR. VANACKER But we don't do that anymore.

MRS. BLEECKER We don't do anything anymore.

Sound of a buzzer. Muzak. Everybody walks, wheels or drives offstage. Empty stage. After a while they return, each carrying a MacDonald's bag.

They take cups, paper plates, boxes with hamburgers out of the bags and start eating. Mrs. Kramer doesn't know how to open the hamburger box. When she finally figures it out, the buzzer is heard. Everybody stuffs the remains of their meals along with the lids and cups back in the bags. They take bottles of pills out of the bags,

swallow the pills with a large Diet Coke. Mrs. Kramer can't open her bottle. When she finally manages, the buzzer is heard. Everybody puts the pills back in the bags and leaves the stage, except Mr. Van Dyck. The music changes. Mr. Van Dyck notices that his tie isn't knotted. He tries to knot it but can't remember how. During his attempts, we hear a countdown, like when a rocket is launched. A newscaster reports about the flood of 1953, when the dikes broke in Holland. The speech of Queen Juliana at the coronation of Princess Beatrix and other important events of the past 70 years are heard. Then boys shouting: "Peter! Peter!" We hear bits of news flashes about the assassination of Kennedy, Martin Luther King and other important events. We also hear the last part of the black box recording of the plane that crashed on an apartment building in Amsterdam: "Going down, going down!" Mr. Van Dyck is crying. The music changes. A pretty young girl in a summer dress enters the stage, dancing cheerfully. Mr. Van Dyck tries to touch her, he cries.

BLACK OUT

INTERMISSION

3. FALL

*Lights fade up. Everybody is back in the room.
Mr. Van Dyck, in the armchair, without a tie,
tries to hide the fact that he has been crying.*

MR. VAN DYCK Life begins at retirement. Since I've been living here, I've become a stranger to my kids. "What has happened to you, dad? You used to be so quiet and now it's like you can't stop talking. You just keep talking, dad, you're talking all the time." And they're right. I talk and talk and talk and talk. But for the last couple of months, I've been feeling more like myself than ever before. "Peter van Dyck is a man of few words." That's what my colleagues used to say. And I was proud of that. "He's a hard worker but he's no talker. At parties, he just sits and watches." And they were right. I used to be as quiet as the grave. "A penny for your thoughts," my wife used to say. What could I tell her? What kind of life is this? Working day after day. Living in the same house, week after week. Walking the same dog in the same park, saying hello to the same neighbors, going to the same parties. Year after year, the same wife. Year after year till death do us part. My God! I couldn't say that to her. You can't say that to your wife. But every time I bit my tongue, the words piled up inside until I was ready to burst, so completely burst that the words just had to come out. And now I can't stop talking, talking, talking. Peter van Dyck has kept his mouth shut for too long. It's time to break the silence. There's at least 30 years of talk inside me. I can't hold it back anymore. I'm full of energy. Every day I jog to the lake and swim. I've never swum in my life but now I swim and swim and swim and swim. And I feel fit, I feel vital, I feel my blood pumping through my veins and I'm making plans for the future. I mean my wife is my wife and that's a fact. But my girlfriend is my girlfriend. I'm dead serious about this, folks. My wife is my wife but my girlfriend is my girlfriend. Oh yeah. My girlfriend is my girlfriend. *He searches his pockets, finds a box of cigars. Ain't life grand, folks!*

He takes out a cigar, searches for a light. Mr. Vanacker pulls a lighter out of his pockets.

MR. VAN DYCK Thanks a lot, buddy! *He takes the lighter, lights the cigar.*

MRS. BLEECKER Excuse me. That's not the way we do things around here.

Mr. Van Dyck doesn't understand.

MRS. BLEECKER We don't smoke in this room.

MR. VAN DYCK But...

MRS. BLEECKER You must be new?

MR. VAN DYCK Listen, Anna...

MRS. BLEECKER It's Mrs. Bleecker to you.

MR. VAN DYCK But you're my girlfriend.

MRS. BLEECKER Don't be ridiculous.

Mrs. Kramer is surprised that there are so many people in her room.

MRS. KRAMER So many guests all of a sudden! I'm not used to entertaining like this!

Mr. Van Dyck tries to touch Mrs. Bleecker.

MRS. BLEECKER Don't you touch me! *to Mr. Vanacker* How can you offer him a light, for God's sake!

MR. VANACKER I'm uh, I'm uh...

MRS. BLEECKER I'm uh, I'm uh... *She points to Mr. Vanacker.* Can't you see this man is on oxygen?

MR. VAN DYCK I didn't know, I mean... *He blows the smoke in another direction.*

MRS. BLEECKER You should be ashamed of yourself! That man is blowing smoke in all our faces!

MRS. KRAMER I'm sorry?

MRS. BLEECKER I'm sorry?

MR. VAN DYCK I'm so sorry...

MRS. BLEECKER Well? Don't just stand there!

MR. VAN DYCK *doesn't know where to go.* Uh...

MRS. BLEECKER What kind of man are you?

MR. VAN DYCK I'm terribly sorry.

The fire alarm goes off. Lights flash. Right above Mr. Van Dyck, a sprinkler goes off.

MR. VANACKER Okay folks, let's not panic-

MRS. BLEECKER *gets a bit wet from the sprinkler* I've just had my hair done!

MR. VANACKER Everybody stay calm!

Mrs. Kramer adjusts her hearing aid. She thinks the fire alarm is feedback.

MRS. BLEECKER *presses the button on the intercom* Hello? This is unbelievable. Hello!

MR. VANACKER I was on the board of the fire brigade for years!

MRS. KRAMER Gosh! I'm not used to having this many people over! MRS. BLEECKER *presses the button again* Hello! Hello!

MR. VANACKER *in a panic* Everything will be alright!

MRS. KRAMER I'm sorry?

MRS. BLEECKER *imitates her* I'm sorry?

MR. VANACKER It's all about, it's all about...

MRS. BLEECKER *reads the instruction card on the wall* "Stay calm."

MR. VANACKER Delegating. I was on the board of the fire brigade, on the board of the steering committee, on the board of the Credit Union.

MRS. KRAMER *gets up* If anyone would like some tea...

MR. VANACKER *aggressive* Would you all please sit your butts down!
Mrs. Kramer immediately sits down.

MR. VANACKER My name is Dirk Vanacker...

Mrs. Bleecker *presses the button.*

MRS. BLEECKER *shouts* Hello! Hello! They're never around when you need them. Hello!

MR. VANACKER Let's keep the discussion focused, for Pete's sake!

MRS. BLEECKER *reads the instructions on the wall.* "Follow the green arrows."

MR. VANACKER First we should-... First we should-...

MRS. BLEECKER *can't find the green arrows* We need to do everything ourselves around here. Nobody gives a damn!

MR. VANACKER On the board of the... On the board of the... I'm Dirk Vanacker. *He finds the instructions and reads them.* "Stay calm."

MRS. BLEECKER Oh please, shut up. *She takes out a crossword puzzle.*

MR. VANACKER "Follow the green arrows. Proceed to the nearest emergency exit." *He tries to find the emergency exit.* The nearest emergency exit... *in a panic* Everything will be alright, folks!

MRS. BLEECKER Old person, six-letter word!

MR. VANACKER *in a panic* I have no idea, I have no idea!

MRS. KRAMER I think I better make some tea first!

MR. VANACKER *shouts* Sit down, for Christ's sake!

INTERCOM *Judith's voice* Hello?

MR. VANACKER Hello?

INTERCOM Mrs. Bleecker?

MR. VANACKER Hello?

MRS. BLEECKER *offended* Do they really expect me to answer now?

MR. VANACKER Hello?

INTERCOM 2 *another voice* Who called?

MR. VANACKER I don't know.

INTERCOM Mrs. Bleecker?

MR. VANACKER *doesn't know who MRS. BLEECKER is* Mrs. Bleecker?

MRS. KRAMER I'm Mrs. Kramer.

MR. VANACKER They're asking for a Mrs. Bleecker.

MRS. KRAMER I'm Mrs. Kramer.

INTERCOM Hello?

MR. VANACKER Hello!

MRS. KRAMER Mary Kroes.

INTERCOM Mrs. Bleecker?

INTERCOM 2 She always pushes the button at the smallest little thing.

MR. VANACKER There is a Mary Kroes over here.

INTERCOM Mrs. Bleecker. Is that you?

MR. VANACKER Hello?

The alarm and the sprinklers stop.

MRS. KRAMER You've got the wrong number.

INTERCOM 2 If it's something important, they'll call back.

INTERCOM Did you watch the Late Night Show last night?

INTERCOM 2 Oh yes, I...

The intercom cuts off. Mr. Van Dyck is soaking wet. He looks for an ashtray, can't find one. He snubs out his cigar in the flower box.

MRS. KRAMER Wait wait wait wait wait!

MRS. BLEECKER That man is throwing his cigar in the flower box!

MRS. KRAMER Come on, boy. You'll catch a cold if you don't take your clothes off.

MRS. BLEECKER Leave him alone!

A kettle whistles. Mrs. Kramer thinks it's her hearing aid. She tries to switch it off but the sound doesn't stop.

MRS. BLEECKER God almighty.

MR. VANACKER It's the kettle.
MRS. KRAMER I'm sorry?
MRS. BLEECKER Can someone please stop this
noise!
MR. VANACKER It's the tea kettle.
MRS. KRAMER I think it's the tea kettle.
She walks away.
MRS. BLEECKER This is so annoying!
*The sound stops. Mrs. Kramer comes back pushing a
small tea table. Mr. Van Dyck gets up, walks to
Mrs. Bleecker, arms spread wide, and tries to
embrace her.*
MRS. BLEECKER Please, stop that!
Mr. Van Dyck embraces her.
MRS. BLEECKER Did you hear me?
*Mr. Van Dyck doesn't let go. Mrs. Bleecker
struggles, manages to break free and slaps him.*
MR. VANACKER *in a panic* It'll all turn out
alright, folks!
MRS. BLEECKER Shut up, you bastard.
MR. VANACKER It always turns out alright,
ladies and gentlemen!
Mr. Van Dyck approaches Mrs. Bleecker again.
MRS. BLEECKER Leave me alone! *She holds up a
chair to keep him at a bay.* My life is hell. I
long for death. I pray and pray to the Lord but
He doesn't answer. Father in heaven, why don't
you help me? Why don't you come and take me away?
MR. VANACKER *outraged* Stop it now. Just stop,
stop, stop! *He gasps for air, turns the valve of
the oxygen tank. Mr. Van Dyck sits down. Mrs.
Kramer walks around with the small tea table.*
MRS. KRAMER It was the tea kettle!
MR. VANACKER When does the tennis start?
*During the next section, Mrs. Kramer hands
everyone a cup of tea.*
MRS. KRAMER Jacob made it to 39. He left on
his motorbike one morning and never came back.
It's the last thing one would expect. I think of
him every day. I think of him every day. I think
of him every day. *She cries.* I think of him every
day.
MRS. BLEECKER This is unbearable.
MRS. KRAMER We had to sell Jacob's Cafe.
People all have TVs now. They prefer to stay
home.
MR. VANACKER When does the tennis start?

MRS. KRAMER We run a reception hall now. We do catering for all sorts of occasions. The whole range- from wedding receptions to funerals. We cater to order. From coffee and donuts to elaborate meals.

MR. VANACKER When does the tennis start?

MRS. BLEECKER There may be no tennis.

MR. VANACKER There's always tennis!

MRS. KRAMER I still cook my own meals at home.

MRS. BLEECKER Would you please stop talking!

MRS. KRAMER I cook for three or four days at a time. Oh no, they won't put me in an old folks' home.

MRS. BLEECKER Then what are you doing here, if I may ask?

MR. VANACKER When does the tennis start?

MRS. BLEECKER Did you hear my question? What are you doing here?

MRS. KRAMER Well, I think I'm also here for the tennis.

MRS. BLEECKER No, you're not.

MR. VANACKER When does the tennis start?

MRS. KRAMER I'm here for the tennis!

MRS. BLEECKER This is an old people's home. You understand? This is an old people's home!

MRS. KRAMER *starts rinsing glasses* Rinsing glasses. It should be done every night.

MRS. BLEECKER This is an old people's home, do you hear?

MR. VANACKER Just leave the lady alone!

MRS. BLEECKER This is an old people's home and I'm the only sane person around here! *She walks to the door, tries to open it.* They lock you up with a bunch of madmen and then they forget about you. *She bangs on the door, shouts.* Herman!

Herman! What did I do to deserve this? Herman! *to Mr. Van Dyck* Leave me alone! *shouts* Herman!

She rattles the door. I'm the only one who pays her way around here. I want a private room.

She rattles the door. Herman! Take me away from here! Come and get me, please! Herman! This is an old people's home. Do you understand? This is a goddamned old people's home! Pass that on to the management!

MRS. KRAMER I rinse for an hour and it clears my head.

MRS. BLEECKER Stop her! Somebody stop that old hag!

MRS. KRAMER I need to stay in practice. It might be useful one day.

MRS. BLEECKER Shut up. For heaven's sake, shut up and sit down! *She forces Mrs. Kramer to sit down on the seat of her walker. Mrs. Bleecker is exhausted. She sits down on the ground next to the door.*

MRS. KRAMER This is where I belong. I'm feeling good. I always listen to the radio and if nobody calls to request a song for me, I call myself. Please play a song for Mary Kroes.

VOICE ON A RADIO And the next song is specially for Mary Kroes.

MRS. KRAMER She lives all alone in her tiny little house on the dike...

VOICE ON A RADIO She lives all alone in her tiny little house on the dike.

MRS. KRAMER She deserves a song just for her.

VOICE ON THE RADIO She deserves a song just for her.

MRS. BLEECKER Can someone turn it down, please?

MRS. KRAMER Just play a German Schlager. She likes those.

VOICE ON A RADIO So, specially for you, Mary Kroes. Your favorite song: Zwei Kleine Italiener. *Mrs. Kramer, in a spotlight, sings along with her hands in the air. Judith enters, swings Mrs. Kramer around on her walker as fast as she can. It's like being on a merry-go-round. Mrs. Kramer enjoys it very much. Suddenly, wind blows, leaves begin to fall, there is thunder and lightning. Mrs. Kramer hurries to take some imaginary laundry down from a nonexistent clothesline.*

MRS. KRAMER *to Judith* Come on dear. If we don't hurry, the laundry will be as wet as when we hung it. *She hands an imaginary laundry basket to Judith.* You hold the basket, mum will take the laundry down. *She clumsily tries to get the laundry off the line.* Jacob was cremated in Goutum. They say I'll have to go to Heereveen. It has to do with zoning, I think. But what difference does it make? Crematoriums are crematoriums. Hearses come and go and smoke continuously rises from the chimneys. *imitates a caretaker* "Please write your name in this book,

now follow me to the mortuary where you can listen to the deceased's favorite music". *ZWEI KLEINE ITALIENER* plays in the distance. Mrs. Kramer lifts her hands in the air. After a while, the music stops. I don't want any music at my funeral. I've already told the kids. Music is for parties. I'm not interested in flowers either. They put them on the casket and the next day, they throw them away. It's a shame. *imitates a caretaker* "You may walk alongside the casket to bid farewell to the deceased. If you would be so kind as to follow me to the lobby now." Sometimes it gets pretty jolly afterwards. "Why do we only meet at funerals? We should try to see each other more often. Why not get together soon. We have so much to talk about!" But it never happens. As we drive home, we forget about it. We'll meet another ten times at most. A shrinking group of people, until we're all gone forever. *Judith kisses her forehead.*

MRS. KRAMER Crematoriums are no good. But being buried is worse. They put you down there among total strangers. Gone is gone, I say. I don't want to deal with any more than I have to. I've hung the key on a hook in the shed. If something happens, the kids will be able to come into the house.

Judith exits. Mrs. Kramer, alone, sits on the seat of her walker. She wipes her glasses.

MRS. KRAMER I've taken care of everything. The tulip bulbs are stored, waiting in the shed for spring to come back. Next to Jacob's tools which are still as organized as they've always been. If he suddenly showed up, he could pick up right where he left off. Sometimes I think I hear him hammering. Or suddenly it's like I hear him sawing behind the house. *She listens.* Do you hear? Don't go out, just keep quiet and listen. *She listens.* He might come in at any moment. I'll put on a big pot of coffee. I'll use two scoops of coffee instead of one. Heating a kettle full of water, that's such a wonderful feeling. I know, it's ridiculous but still. When I wait here, like this, for him to come in, I feel so peaceful and quiet.

Silence

I'm tired of waiting all winter for spring to arrive. As soon as it's light, it gets dark again. Nothing fun about that. I used to have the strength to just go on and on and on. But my spirit is gone, I don't know why. When I was in the hospital for my heart, I fainted once during dinner, with the plate on my lap. It was like someone had pulled the plug. That would have been such a wonderful death. When I came to, I was really disappointed. *Sound of a motorbike in the distance. She lifts a finger.* Jacob's motorbike was intact, not a single scratch. But they told me there was little left of Jacob himself. They cremated him in Goutum. They say I'll have to go to Heereveen. But I'll have them scatter my ashes into sea so I can reach Jacob one day. Oh, yes. Everything is settled. All has been taken care of.

A man in a leather jacket and helmet enters carrying a bunch of red roses. As he opens the door, a strong gust of wind blows into the room. Mrs. Kramer is excited to see him. He embraces her. They kiss and exit.

BLACK-OUT

4. STORMY WEATHER

Fall storm. We hear air raid sirens and bombers. Judith walks around with a flashlight. Thunder and rain. In the light of the flashlight, we see Mr. Van Dyck sleeping in his chair. He is awoken by the light.

MR. VAN DYCK Is there a blackout?

JUDITH It's nothing to be afraid of. Please put on this jacket. *She hands him a rain jacket.*

MR. VAN DYCK Why is that?

JUDITH We need to be prepared.

The light shines on Mr. Vanacker, sitting in his chair, eyes wide open.

MR. VANACKER How did I end up here? At this moment I mean.

JUDITH Please put the jacket on, Mr. Vanacker. *She gives him the jacket.*

MR. VANACKER I wouldn't mind finding out about that.

Judith's flashlight shines on Mrs. Bleecker's face. Mr. Van Dyck follows Judith.

MR. VAN DYCK You have to put on a jacket!

MRS. BLEECKER Leave me alone!

MR. VAN DYCK Please, Anna...

MRS. BLEECKER I'm not going to walk around in that stupid jacket!

MR. VAN DYCK We need to be prepared!

MRS. BLEECKER I'm not going to make a fool of myself!

MR. VAN DYCK *in a panic* Try to be sensible, dear...

MRS. BLEECKER This man drives me crazy!

JUDITH *to Mr. Van Dyck* Why don't you sit down?

MR. VAN DYCK You're my girlfriend!

MRS. BLEECKER Fuck off!

Lightning, thunder. Lights come up. Judith stands behind a desk like a TV host.

JUDITH In what city can Rembrandt's famous painting *The Nightwatch* be found?

MR. VANACKER *presses a button on his wheelchair, causing the horn to go off* That would be in the city of Amsterdam. *Trumpet sounds, applause.*

JUDITH *enthusiastic* That's right!

MR. VANACKER My name is Dirk Vanacker. I'm 33!

JUDITH You're amazing, Dirk. Home...

MR. VANACKER *hits the button* Sweet home! Yesterday I passed my driving test...

MRS. BLEECKER My God, what garbage.

JUDITH An apple a day...

MRS. BLEECKER Keeps the doctor away.

JUDITH You have to press the button, Mrs. Bleecker.

MRS. BLEECKER You have to press the button, Mrs. Bleecker.

MR. VANACKER I immediately bought a car. It's the first car in town. I'm always the first to buy things.

MRS. BLEECKER I'm the only sane person around here.

MR. VANACKER We had the only TV on the block. Later we bought a color TV.

JUDITH Apple blossom-

MR. VANACKER Pink! Hi-fi stereo, video, fondue set!

Mr. Van Dyck stands next to Mrs. Bleecker. He offers her a badminton racket.

MRS. BLEECKER Go away. Please!

Mr. Van Dyck sits, disappointed.

JUDITH How many ounces in a pound?

Silence

JUDITH Can you guess, Mr. Van Dyck ?

Mr. Van Dyck doesn't answer.

JUDITH What weighs more? A ton of feathers...

MR. VANACKER They both weigh the same! A big black Chevy...

MRS. BLEECKER I'm the only sane person around here.

MR. VANACKER I drove around town all night...

MRS. BLEECKER *to Judith* Can you please make him stop?

JUDITH Queen Beatrix...

Mrs. Bleecker takes out her crossword puzzle.

MR. VANACKER Prince Claus. All the neighbors ran outside to watch me go by, honking the horn!

JUDITH A bird...

MR. VANACKER In the hand is worth two in the bush. And the neighbors waved and I honked. And they waved. And I honked. And..

MRS. BLEECKER Old person, six-letter word.

MR. VANACKER Senior. And they waved. And I honked...

MRS. BLEECKER This is unbearable...

MR. VANACKER Last week we buried our father. He died from throat cancer.

MRS. BLEECKER Small room...

MR. VANACKER Cage! I'll have to leave school now. Which is a good thing, in a way.

MRS. BLEECKER *to Judith* Why don't you tell him to stop!

JUDITH Name three vowels.

MR. VANACKER O, U, A.

JUDITH Jack, Queen...

MR. VANACKER King, Ace!

JUDITH You're amazing, Dirk!
Trumpet sounds, applause. Judith leaves.

MRS. BLEECKER *to Judith* I'm talking to you!

MR. VANACKER From now on, my brother and I are going to run my father's grocery store. I would prefer to be a bus driver. But it's all been decided for me.

MRS. BLEECKER Oh, just go to hell.

MR. VANACKER See? Everyone greets me. I'm a leader in town. They're going to give me a medal soon. It's all happening behind the scene, you know. I was on the board of ... The board of... The board of the choir, the steering committee, the board of the Farmers Credit Union, the Rabobank... The board of commissioners... The board of commissioners... I am... I was...

Silence

I'm Dirk Vanacker. I'm here.

RADIO HOST And now, specially for you Dirk Vanacker. Here's your favorite comedian! Here is Harry Touw!

We hear the crackling of an LP record and the voice of Harry Touw. Mr. Vanacker is surprised. Harry Touw is a mediocre comedian, who used to be very popular because of his dirty jokes. Mr. Vanacker enjoys the recording, laughing out loud. He knows all the punch lines, saying them before Harry Touw gets to them. Mr. Vanacker becomes short of breath and reaches for the valve of the oxygen tank but the tank is empty. The comedian goes on with his silly jokes. Mr. Vanacker tries to get someone's attention. Mrs. Bleecker sees him. She presses the button on the intercom.

Judith enters, sees that Mr. Vanacker is gasping for air, exits again. The music changes. We hear a Lou Bandy song. Mr. Van Dyck recognizes the music he and Mrs. Bleecker danced to in a previous scene.

MRS. BLEECKER *scared* No. Please. I really don't want this. Please. Leave me alone. For Christ's sake, leave me alone!

Mr. Van Dyck runs to Mrs. Bleecker, pulls her out of her chair and starts dancing with her. Mrs. Bleecker doesn't want him to touch her. Mr. Van Dyck forces her to dance. She struggles. The dance becomes increasingly violent. The music changes to a nightmare version of the Lou Bandy song. Mr. Van Dyck drags Mrs. Bleecker through the room and hurls her around until he collapses from exhaustion. Mrs. Bleecker presses the button on the intercom. Judith rushes in with a new oxygen tank. She's followed by another nurse who puts Mr. Van Dyck in a wheelchair and rolls him out. Mrs. Bleecker escapes as soon as the door is open. For a moment, Judith doesn't know what to do. She decides to connect the new oxygen bottle.

MR. VANACKER *out of breath* You could be a cover girl, do you know that?

Judith smiles. He takes her by the arm.

MR. VANACKER Sometimes I'm afraid the end won't be so easy, you know? I don't know, I... As far as I'm concerned, it should be bang, over and silence. Death is death and that's it. There's nobody out there waiting for us. Although at times, I really wish there was. I mean, there should be something more, I mean, there should be... If there's nothing after this, what would be before? I mean nothing starts nowhere and nothing never ends. So there can't be something before nothing. So if there's nothing after this, this would be nothing as well. And in a way, everything would be the same forever. Everything would be nothing, I mean. But this must be something, now, at this moment, don't you think, Judith? This... I mean we. We are something, aren't we? You and I... We must be something, don't you think? We just...

Judith kisses him on the forehead and walks away.

MR. VANACKER Judith! Pause There must be something after this. There has to be. But what

that looks like... Nobody knows. *He cries.* I
don't know Judith ...I don't know. I... I...
*Lights dim. Mr. Vanacker rides around in the
dark, the lights of the wheelchair shining in
front of him. We hear music, like in a road
movie.*

5. WINTER

Mr. Van Dyck lies in intensive care. Mr. Vanacker sits next to him. He wears a winter coat, and a hat and gloves.

MR. VAN DYCK You know, Vanacker. In the morning, when the curtains are opened and the sun is shining, I feel so happy! I can't remember how many times I've opened the curtains. And there's always a different sky. I used to bike to work. My first bike belonged to my oldest brother. When you turned the handlebars the other way around, it was like riding a racing bike. The first time I rode it, I crashed into a tree. I was looking over my shoulder to show my mother how fast I was going. But she was talking to the neighbors. Nobody saw me fall. Nobody noticed. On the other hand, everything my grandchildren do is documented on photos and videotapes. There are hours of tapes and albums full of events. *He points to his head.* I keep my album upstairs. If I forget something, it will be lost forever. So I must remember. Remember forever. Like when we built a snowman in front of our house, with father's hat and scarf which my mother kept in the wardrobe in the hall. I used to put my ear against that wardrobe and hear the sound of my father building it. I don't remember much about my father. No face, no voice, nothing specific. Only his coughing, my mother's and the doctor's whispers, and later his casket which got stuck in the stairwell when they carried it down. My kids won't forget me. There are pictures and videos of me. There's even an article about the celebration of my 40th year at the company. It said on the front page of the local paper: 'Peter van Dyck, Supervisor of the cheese warehouse, responsible for flipping the cheeses over'. When I started working, I was logging bags of coal to the boilers. I really worked my way up, wouldn't you agree? If only I could have been a school teacher. I loved to read stories to kids. I still do, actually. I'm sure I would have made a great teacher. But you know how things go, Vanacker. So

many opportunities come by during a lifetime. You have to grab them. But sometimes you're simply looking in the other direction or you're so damned tired you forget to be alert. And the things you're really waiting for pretty often don't come by at all.

MR. VANACKER How did I end up here... *He wants to get up.*

MR. VAN DYCK Please, buddy, stay for a minute.

MR. VANACKER sits down again.

MR. VAN DYCK There's so much I want to tell you. So much I need to share. Sometimes, after my kids leave, events come back to me in a flash. Dammit! Why didn't I tell them that, I must not forget the next time. You want them to have at least an impression of who you really were. I am Peter Christiaan van Dyck. My name can be found in the Records Office in the town of Itens. Peter Christiaan Van Dyck . Written with a fountain pen in elegant, cursive letters. December 23rd. A freezing day, just as freezing as today. This cold will go on forever, Vanacker. You can count on it.

He rubs his hands. Do you remember the cold on your hands when throwing snowballs... Goose bumps, standing in the kitchen, after coming out of the tub... I would give a fortune to feel those things again. The icy tiles under my feet... My mother roughly drying my hair... *beat* I'll be taken to the cemetery in the kind of car only the Queen rode when I was born. I can say I've worked my way up, wouldn't you agree? But still... *He snaps his fingers.* That's it. Yesterday, last week... *He snaps his fingers.* Last year, ten years ago... *He snaps his fingers again.* It's all so hard to grasp. If I piled up the loaves of bread I've eaten in my life, or the hair I've left at the barber shop or the shoes I've worn out, maybe I would get a sense of what it means to be eighty. *pause* I have no idea how to go on, Vanacker. I really don't... I only wanted to dance with her. You saw it. I only wanted to dance!

Mr. Vanacker moves.

MR. VAN DYCK Please, don't leave me. Just stay with me for a while. Let's use the time we have left and make the best of it! *enthusiastic* Do you

remember the silence at sunset? When all the birds suddenly stop singing? We could hear a milk churn bang, far in the distance. What a gigantic world we lived in. How dark the nights were. Until one night, when gas lights were introduced, the town of Leeuwarden appeared in the distance. The first train that roared past our village... The church tower that collapsed one night, just like that... It wasn't until I retired that I learned how to wash dishes. I can cook my own meals now. I can be totally self-sufficient if I have to. *beat* We drank hot chocolate on our wedding day... *He suddenly falls asleep. Mr. Vanacker doesn't know what to do, tries to wake him up. Mr. Van Dyck doesn't react. He seems to have passed out. Mr. Vanacker gets up to go to the intercom but can't reach it because of the oxygen tank.*

MR. VANACKER Van Dyck. Please... I...
Mr. Van Dyck wakes up. Lights dim, spotlight on the bed. Snow slowly begins to fall. A campfire burns by the side of the bed.

MR. VAN DYCK It was one of the heaviest storms I've ever experienced. Trees were yanked from the ground, roots and all. Constant thunder, lightning everywhere. My mother didn't want us to stand by the window. In the parsonage down the street, the vicar was sitting under a table. When he was a boy, lightning had struck his house and burned it to the ground. He had been terrified of thunderstorms ever since. So there he was, hiding under the table, waiting for the storm to subside, when suddenly he hears someone at the door. The wind is howling, the rain beating at the windows and in the distance, there's the sound of the doorbell again. "This must be some kind of emergency," the vicar thinks, so he gathers up his courage, crawls out from under the table, runs through the hallway and swings the door open. The wind blows in his face. Standing on the steps, in the pouring rain, is Folkert, wearing his long leather coat and his ever present trilby hat. He was already in his eighties, in those days, mind you. Imagine! That tiny little man, soaked from head to toe, holding a goose egg, which he is protecting from the storm with both hands. "Good heavens, Folkert,

did you brave this beastly weather to bring me a goose egg?" "It's the tradition, Vicar. The first goose egg of the year." "But aren't you afraid of being struck by lightning?" "Certainly not, Vicar. If it's my time, it will come no matter what. The weather has nothing to do with it." *laughs* An extraordinary man, that Folkert. The world was full of such characters in those days. Drifters. Joekie and Lalla, who emptied the slop buckets... Did you know those guys?

MR. VANACKER Why were they called Joeki and Lalla?

MR. VAN DYCK I have no idea. Everybody called them that. In winter, the buckets would sometime freeze so Joeki and Lalla would put them on a fire to thaw and start playing cards. Sometimes, they were so involved in their game that the slop in the buckets would start to boil. Can you picture it? The two men playing cards, next to a bubbling bucket of slop. Hilarious! We must remember those stories. Do you remember Steven Baker, the famous fake fisherman? Do you remember how we used to go fishing on the Ijsselmeer every year? Steven, always with the newest fishing rod and finest rain-clothes but he couldn't even cast his line. And one time, he caught his line under the boat, for a change. And when he went down to the galley to get a drink, Paul van der Bilt tied Steven' line to Jan Smit's, who was an even worst fisherman. You should have seen them, on opposite sides of the boat, shouting at the top of their lungs: "I caught one, I caught one!" They nearly pulled each other overboard!

They laugh.

MR. VANACKER Or when we were sitting in the galley eating pea soup and Paul put Gerard de Jong's dentures in Simon van der Meulen's soup. Simon is enjoying his soup when suddenly he discovers these false teeth. Simon immediately figures this must be a practical joke. So what does he do? With two fingers, he fishes the dentures out of his soup and shouts: "Folks, look what I just found!"

MR. VAN DYCK *together with Mr. Vanacker* Look what I just found!

MR. VANACKER And he licks them off and hop, tosses them overboard.

They laugh.

MR. VAN DYCK Oh, my God. Gerard's wife cursing... Gerard, without teeth, trying to calm her down...

MR. VANACKER *as if he had no teeth* Pleaf ftay calm, fweetheart...

MR. VAN DYCK My god, that was funny!

MR. VANACKER We had to raise money for a new set of dentures but what a wonderful joke it was and what a hilarious reaction, just hilarious!

They laugh.

MR. VAN DYCK Or when Willem Westra fell asleep, sitting in a bar, and we glued cigarette paper to his glasses. When he woke up, he squealed like a pig. *in a panic* "I'm blind! I'm blind!"

MR. VANACKER *together with Mr. Van Dyck* I'm blind! I'm blind! We certainly knew how to have fun!

MR. VANACKER laughs loudly, coughs, laughs and gasps for air. MR. VAN DYCK is oblivious.

MR. VAN DYCK Oh, my God. Simon, Peter and Willem. You could always count on a good laugh with those three! They were all here for a while. They were all people once, walking the face of the earth. We shouldn't forget them. You must promise not to forget those wonderful men!

Mr. Vanacker is dead. Judith enters and sees that Mr. Vanacker has passed away. She wheels him out.

MR. VAN DYCK There used to be a woman in this room. Maybe you could tell me, maybe you know... *Judith is gone. Silence, except for the sound of the monitor.*

BLACK OUT

6. MRS. BLEECKER DIES

Mrs. Bleecker has escaped from the old folks' home. She stands on the side of a highway, a plastic bag with the logo of Dungelman Shoes in her hands. She's changing clothes. She puts on a brand new dress and shoes. Cars zoom by. Snow is falling, covering Mrs. Bleecker.

MRS. BLEECKER Don't give up, Anna. It's cold now but soon you'll be warm again. Try to stay calm and focus on your heartbeat. *She listens to her heartbeat.* Just stop beating, please. It's too much fuss for nothing. Calm down, Mrs. Bleecker. What's the point of being here when nobody calls you Anna anymore? When nobody touches you anymore? I haven't been kissed in such a long time... When did I see Herman for the last time? Have I changed a lot? Calm down, Anna. "She still looks fabulous," they'll say when they come to see you in your casket. "You wouldn't say she's ninety-two, would you? She just couldn't go on any longer. Her spirit was broken. It's better like this." Bye, bye Anna, you sweet little girl. It's like you're sleeping. With your thumb in your mouth. You've been playing in the sun all day and now your shoulders are burning against the thin cool sheets. Just sleep on forever, honey, frozen in your casket, with your brand new dress bought at Block's Fashion House. I've been the same size for thirty years. Shall I tell you my secret? There is no secret. I'm lying in my casket, as cold as a block of ice, wearing this gorgeous dress and a pair of brand new quality shoes from Dungelman, which I'll never take a single step in. From the box into the grave. That's what I call a long term investment. Well done, little girl, very well done. Always stylish, always elegant. Even in the grave one needs to cut a good figure. *laughs* That's true, isn't it? Even in the grave...
She dies.

7. MR. VAN DYCK DIES.

Mr. Van Dyck is still lying in bed. We hear the beeping of the monitor. Judith sits next to him, reading a book.

MR. VAN DYCK There used to be a woman...
A long beep. Judith closes the book and turns off the monitor. Black out. In the dark, we hear the sound of children on a playground. Shouting, laughter, the squeaking of a swing.
Silence

END OF PLAY