

CHANGE OF SHIFT

10:00 Drama

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CHANGE OF SHIFT

A 10:00 drama

SYNOPSIS:

Mr. Johnson is dying. Therapists from the Care for the Dying Society tend him at his apartment. His daughter, Joan, arrives for a final visit before he passes at the moment in which the care-giving shift is changing. Mr. Johnson suffers from Asperger's syndrome, a disease which has made him painfully anxious and angry about life. But, according to Mrs. Johnson, as he is approaching death, he has become "different." Joan hopes against hope for even the smallest crumb of intimacy from this cold, distant, angry man. Has he changed?

CHARACTERS:

Mrs. Johnson - An older woman.

Joan - Her daughter.

Shaneequa - African-American nursing care worker.

Bernice - Heavily tattooed massage therapist.

Mr. Johnson - An older man who is dying. He suffers from Asperger's syndrome.

LOCATION:

The Johnson apartment living room.

PROPS:

Cleaning supplies, massage supplies, coffee service with tray and cups.

CHANGE OF SHIFT

AT RISE.

THERE IS A KNOCK ON THE FRONT DOOR S.R. MRS. JOHNSON, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue, crosses LIVING ROOM to open door as SHANEEQUA ENTERS from MR. JOHNSON'S BEDROOM, a second door S.C. with tote of damp towels, bath soaps, sponges, etc. MRS. JOHNSON focuses herself and "tries to be brave" amid her grief.

MRS. JOHNSON:
(surprised)
Joan!

JOAN:
Momma!

JOAN enters with suitcase and embraces her mother. JOAN blots at her eyes with a tissue. They both stand back blotting their eyes. MRS. JOHNSON closes the door.

MRS. JOHNSON:
(blotting tears from
her eyes)
Joan, dear. This is Shaneequa.
Shaneequa, this is my daughter
Joan.

SHANEEQUA waves. MRS. JOHNSON holds onto JOAN like she is afraid she will go away.

SHANEEQUA:
Hey!

JOAN:
Pleased to meet you.

SHANEEQUA:
Likewise.

MRS. JOHNSON:
Shaneequa is from the Care for the
Dying Society. They've been so good
to me. They've helped me so much
with your father.

SHANEEQUA:
I'm the bath lady!
(gesturing with
tote)
Mr. Johnson is "baby fresh!"

SHANEEQUA picks up a tub of water which sits near her tote-box of soaps and EXITS into KITCHEN - S.L.

JOAN:
(once SHANEEQUA is
out of hearing)
Baby fresh!? You don't mean Daddy
lets her bathe him?

MRS. JOHNSON:
Oh, your daddy is much different,
Joan.
(teary-eyed)
Much different!

SHANEEQUA RETURNS.

SHANEEQUA:
(wiping her hand
with lotion)
Bernice should be here in a minute.

MRS. JOHNSON:
Shaneequa gives your father a bath
every day. You know you need it
when you're... you're...!
(she begins to weep)

KNOCK ON THE DOOR.

SHANEEQUA:
I'll get it. You go ahead and
cry...

SHANEEQUA crosses to door.

MRS. JOHNSON:
(to JOAN)
They've been such a help -- a real
blessing. I don't know what I'd do
without them.

SHANEEQUA opens door. ENTER BERNICE, a large, white, tattooed woman carrying a tote-box of cheap oils and lotions.

SHANEEQUA:
Hey Bernice.

SHANEEQUA shuts door behind her.

BERNICE:
(entering)
Hey Shaneequa. How is Mr. J today?

SHANEEQUA:
Mr. J's a little weaker. But,
cheerful! Sweet.

MRS. JOHNSON moves JOAN over to meet BERNICE.

MRS. JOHNSON:
(cheerfully)
Bernice, his is my daughter Joan.
She's just arrived from Michigan!

BERNICE crosses and extends a beefy hand.

BERNICE:
Nice to meet you.

JOAN:
And you.

BERNICE:
(gesturing with her
tote of oils)
I give Mr. J a massage.

BERNICE crosses to MR. JOHNSON'S DOOR.

BERNICE: (CONT'D)
(confidentially)
Coconut lotion is his favorite!

JOAN:
(to MRS. J)
Daddy?!

MRS. JOHNSON:
He's different...
(tearing up)
...much different!

SHANEEQUA:
I'm outtaheah...

SHANEEQUA picks up her purse and extracts a long lanyard
with a big set of keys on the end. SHANEEQUA EXITS.

BERNICE:
(to SHANEEQUA)
Bye!
(to JOAN)
Mr. J is such a sweet-heart!

BERNICE exits into Mr. JOHNSON'S room.

BERNICE: (CONT'D)
(cheerfully as she
opens the door)
Mr. J? It's Ber-nice! I got my big
coconut smellin' hands comin' at
ya! Ha-ha-ha...

BERNICE closes door behind her leaving MRS. JOHNSON and
JOAN alone.

JOAN:
Have I just walked into a different
planet?

MRS. JOHNSON:
Your daddy is different.

JOAN:
A black woman and a tattooed woman
bathing and massaging my father?!
(she laughs)
Inconceivable!

MRS. JOHNSON:
Different...! very different!
(she begins tearing
up)
You'll see.

JOAN:
Is he in a coma?

HEAR laughter coming from MR. JOHNSON'S room.

MRS. JOHNSON:
Obviously not.

JOAN:
This is a man who suffered from
Aspberger his entire life?

MRS. JOHNSON:
(tearfully)
I know!

JOAN:
Hated blacks. Anyone with tattoos.
Jews. Democrats. Literature majors.
Anyone carrying a Bible!

MRS. JOHNSON:
(tearfully)
I know...!

JOAN:
Ridiculed everyone and everything
including me!

MRS. JOHNSON:
(drying her eyes)
That was the Aspberger's dear.

JOAN:
Swore like a sailor!

MRS. JOHNSON:
Life was painful ...

JOAN:
And now a black woman...

MRS. JOHNSON:
Shaneequa.

JOAN:
And a tattooed woman...

MRS. JOHNSON:
With coconut lotion!

JOAN:
And he's naked?

MRS. JOHNSON:
In all his glory!
(blubbering)
I've watched!

JOAN:
(comfort her mother)
Oh, momma!

MRS. JOHNSON:
He just smiles and smiles and she
slathers on the lotions! All over!

JOAN:
He hated lotions!! Remember when I was, oh, I don't know 5 or 6 and he was napping on the couch? I put baby lotion on his wrist?! He woke up screaming! "God-dam-it!" he said! God-dam-it!

MRS. JOHNSON:
(gaining composure)
I remember...

JOAN:
Then he got into that rhythm thing... God-god-god... dam-dam-dam... god-god-god... dam-dam-dam...

MRS. JOHNSON:
I know. I remember.
(a beat)
Now he's different because he's...
he's...

MRS. JOHNSON bursts into tears and falls into JOAN's arms.

MRS. JOHNSON: (CONT'D)
(tearing)
...dying!

JOAN:
(holding her Mom)
Oh momma. Yes. Yes. I know. I know.
Daddy's dying. Shhh... Shhhh...
That's why I'm here...

MRS. JOHNSON:
I'm glad... I'm so glad you came!

JOAN:
And how does he treat you? Is he still so belittling? Finding fault with everything?

MRS. JOHNSON:
Well... What can you do?

A BURST OF LAUGHTER from MR. JOHNSON and BERNICE O.S. erupts.

JOAN:
Laughter!? I don't ever remember
laughter. Do you remember laughter?
Did Daddy ever laugh?

MRS. JOHNSON:
When we were first married...
sometimes. Maybe...

JOAN:
He never laughed with me. Only at
me. But, you and I laughed together
- alot - didn't we mom?

MRS. JOHNSON:
(holding on to JOAN)
Oh, yes we did, honey.

JOAN:
Daddy always made the house so
serious. So somber. So critical. So
judgmental.

MRS. JOHNSON moves away toward the kitchen.

MRS. JOHNSON:
He suffered everyday.
(a beat)
Coffee, Joanie?

JOAN:
Sure, I'd love some.

MRS. JOHNSON EXITS S.L. to the KITCHEN. JOAN crosses to the
mantle and picks up a FRAMED PHOTO.

JOAN: (CONT'D)
(talking aloud to
her mother)
You still have this old photo on
the mantle!

MRS. JOHNSON: (O.S.)
Oh yes, dear! It's your father's
favorite. He looks at it often.

JOAN:
Really? I didn't know Daddy had a
favorite photograph of me!

MRS. JOHNSON: (O.S.)
If you remember, that was a very,
very happy day for you.

MRS. JOHNSON ENTERS with a tea-towel.

JOAN:

My high school graduation. I was valedictorian! We shamed him into going.

MRS. JOHNSON:

That's right dear! And everyone greeted him so warmly and thanked him for coming.

MRS. JOHNSON EXITS to KITCHEN.

JOAN:

(looking at photo
and laughing)

I remember he sat so stock still he looked petrified! He looked like he was in pain the whole time.

MRS. JOHNSON ENTERS with an ELECTRIC KETTLE and a JAR OF INSTANT COFFEE plus CUPS ON A TRAY.

MRS. JOHNSON:

I'm sure he was. But, he did go. He was there, wasn't he?

JOHN puts the photo back on the mantle.

JOAN:

Yes he was!

MRS. JOHNSON:

And that was something, wasn't it!

JOAN:

Yes it was. But, what I wanted was a one word of praise. Anything. Anything at all. But, when he hugged me he said, "Can I go home now?"

MRS. JOHNSON puts COFFEE POT AND CUPS ON TRAY onto coffee table.

JOAN: (CONT'D)

Well, I came all this way hoping that, just once, before he dies, he'll say something nice. Something pleasant. Anything. Anything at all.

They fix their coffee.

DOOR to MR. JOHNSON'S ROOM opens and BERNICE pushes MR. JOHNSON into the room in a wheelchair.

MRS. JOHNSON:

I tried to make it up to you,
honey.

JOAN:

Do you think it's too much for me
to hope for him to say something
like, "Joan, I've been meaning to
say something to you - I'm sorry.
Will you forgive me?"

(sensing his approach)

Daddy...!

BERNICE pushes MR. JOHNSON closer to JOAN.

BERNICE:

I told Mr. J that you were here.
He said he wanted to come out and
see you! Isn't that right, Mr. J?

JOAN kneels down by her father.

JOAN:

I came all the way to see you,
Daddy!

MR. JOHNSON:

(gruffly)

You did? Why?!

JOAN:

Momma called me. She said...
you're... you're not well.

MR. JOHNSON:

Goddamn right I'm not well!

(suddenly shouts)

I'm dyin! Dyin', Joan!

JOAN:

(tenderly)

I know, Daddy! You don't have to
shout.

JOAN tries to hug him. Picture gets in the way.

MR. JOHNSON:
(shouting)
There's that picture.

JOAN holds up picture and they look at it.

MR. JOHNSON: (CONT'D)
I remember that picture.

BERNICE:
You like that there picture, don't
ya Mr. J? You sit with it often.

JOAN puts her arm around MR. JOHNSON's shoulders.

MR. JOHNSON:
(throws JOAN's arm
off)
Don't touch me, Goddamit! I don't
wanna be touched!

JOAN:
(surprised)
Geez, Dad!

MR. JOHNSON:
Stop complaining! All you do is
complain, complain, complain!

MRS. JOHNSON:
Joan maybe you want to come over
here by me?

JOAN:
(grimly)
I don't think so, mom.

BERNICE:
Mr. J! Don't you have something to
say to Joan? You said you had
somethin' to say...!

MR. JOHNSON:
Yeah. Okay. I guess so.
(gesturing)
C'mere...

JOAN bends down close to him.

JOAN:
(to her mother)
Yeah, what do you need, Dad?

MR. JOHNSON:

(quietly)

Can I go home now?

JOAN hugs him and he pulls away as if it is painful.

FADE LIGHTS OUT.