

Happens All the Time

a one-act play

by Joan O'Dwyer © 2021

CHARACTERS

in order of appearance

KATE - 40s

MARTHA - 40s, facilitator

FIDELA – 20s, wears a huge cross

LAUREL – 20s, shy

DAVE – 30s, veterinarian

Time: The present

Place: A room at The Health Conclave, a cancer support group

Set: MARTHA's chair is upstage center at the top of an upside-down "V," two small couches fanning out from either side, then two chairs to each side of a couch. On wall upstage center is a huge smiley-face poster that says, "Have a nice day!"

Lights out except for center spot. KATE enters and stands in spot, talks to audience.

KATE

Hi. I'm Kate, and I'm dead. When I was alive I had cancer. Well, not the whole time, just at the end for about six months. It was the worst six months of my life. The main problem was my fiancé, Tom. My doctors all told me I was going to die. I was prepared to die. Tom wouldn't hear of it.

(talks like Tom)

"Kate, there has to be something we can do."

(talks like KATE)

Turned out there was. Lots. Tom chauffeured me to place after extraordinary place looking for hope. I saw Colleen, an Irish psychic who read my future in a glass of water.

FIDELA character enters with a glass of water, interacts, as Colleen, with KATE, then sits in a side chair.

I meditated with Rami, the fluffy-haired Hindu practitioner.

MARTHA character enters, interacts, as Rami, with KATE, then sits in center chair.

I went to a Baptist revival meeting in a steamy tent where the charismatic leader laid his hot hands on my forehead, pushing me backward into the arms of his sweaty assistant.

LAUREL and DAVE characters enter, interact, as leader and assistant, with KATE, then they sit in a side chair and lie on a couch, respectively.

I tried acupuncture, shark cartilage, maitake mushrooms, coffee enemas -- all at Tom's insistence. At the end there was nothing good that came...and there was something bad. The knife-like pain in what was left of my food tube had returned. I began to have fainting spells. I didn't tell Tom.

Lights on full.

KATE (cont'd)

My last hope, the last place I visited, was this: The Health Conclave.

(to Tom, offstage)

Goodbye, Tom. Pick me up at...

(to cancer group)

What time is this over?

MARTHA

Hello and welcome to the Health Conclave. My name is Martha. I'm the facilitator. Our cooperative wellness sessions usually last an hour and a half.

KATE

Yeah, well.

(to Tom, offstage)

Hour and a half, OK?

(catches a bag of marshmallows thrown at her from offstage, says to the group)

Marshmallows. Only thing I can eat any more.

KATE abruptly falls to floor. MARTHA and LAUREL pick her up, leading her to the couch – no fuss. DAVE picks up her marshmallows.

MARTHA

Just lie down. Do you need smelling salts?

(whips a bottle out of her pocket)

KATE

You had those pretty handy.

MARTHA

Yes, indeedee. This sort of thing happens all the time around here.

KATE

No thanks, although I'm feeling a bit woozy and not at all perky today. Toss me my marshmallows, will ya?

(DAVE tosses)

Thanks. I feel like a damn fool being here in the first place. Feel like a damnder fool lying down. Maybe I should go home.

MARTHA

Nonsense. Don't worry. Happens all the time.

FIDELA

(to LAUREL)

Wish she wouldn't swear, don't you?

(to KATE)

I wish you wouldn't swear.

DAVE

I'm lying down, too, in case you didn't notice. People do it all the time.

MARTHA

Yes indeedee, they do. Now. We had just barely begun. We're missing a few members, one in for surgery and two who died last month. We were talking about them when you came in.

KATE

Oh, dear.

MARTHA

Don't think a bit about it. It happens all the time around here. Since you're new, the rest of the group can introduce themselves to you. Then could you perhaps tell us who you are, what type of cancer you have? In other words, why you are here.

DAVE

I'm Dave. I had finished veterinary school and was going to open up a clinic with a fellow classmate, and then I got a brain tumor.

LAUREL

(nervous)

I'm Laurel married no kids a cashier at the Cineplex 4, lung cancer.

FIDELA

(dramatic)

I have leukemia, but I pray every day for God to spare me. I do believe he's listening real hard, because my sister in Texas had her bone marrow tested, and it's a match. She's coming next week to donate some for me.

MARTHA

Yes, we're all very happy for Fidela. You forgot to tell Kate your name, Fidela.

FIDELA

My sweet Lord be praised, I surely did.

KATE

Sure, well. My name is Kate... Say, do you all mind if I nibble on these? I don't have much of my...haha...digestive system left, so I have to eat all the time. These things seem to go down pretty well.

(dramatic)

I talk to my marshmallows, and they listen real hard. Then mixing sensually with my saliva, the marshmallows, developing a spongy, nasty-wet texture and they just sort of slide themselves down my—

FIDELA

That is so disgusting.

MARTHA

Fidela, I'm sure you mean it would be all right if Kate ate quietly. It actually happens all the time.

FIDELA

I guess. As long as she don't talk about it no more.

KATE

(sotto voce)

Doesn't. Any more.

FIDELA

What?

KATE

Nothing. May I say that that certainly is an inspiring poster, Martha, as well as being so colorful. And abstract. Definitely abstract.

MARTHA

(without irony)

Thank you, Kate.

KATE

Why am I here? That's a good question, a legitimate question. I'll try to answer.

(nibbles marshmallows off and on throughout play)

When I was eighteen, my first year in college, I played Isabella in *Measure for Measure*.

LAUREL

Measure for Measure. Is that Shakespeare?

KATE

Yes, good, Laurel.

LAUREL

Thank you. You a teacher?

KATE

(pops another marshmallow into mouth, then says without irony)

No, a dietician. Anyway, Isabella is a tyro nun whose brother, Claudio, was imprisoned by a corrupt official for bawdry.

FIDELA

Wuzzat?

KATE

Bawdry? In this case it means having sex without being married.

FIDELA

No, tired-o.

KATE

Tyro? It means she's in training to be a nun, but she hasn't taken her vows yet.

FIDELA

Whyn't you say so inna first place?

KATE

OK. Well, Isabella goes to her brother to help him prepare for his death, and--

DAVE

What does this have to do with who you are and what kind of cancer you have, your doctor, your treatments, the prognosis -- all that?

KATE

I'm getting to that. Kind of. This is more my philosophy, what I've been thinking about recently.

DAVE

Weird. But don't you want to tell us what kind of cancer you have?

KATE

In a minute. The point is that I don't remember any of my lines from that play.

DAVE

That's the point?

KATE

In fact, the only lines I remember are Claudio's speech when he talks about what will happen when he dies.

LAUREL

Tell it. You go, girl.

KATE

Well...

(suddenly shy)

There are a whole lot of things that Claudio's imagined about the afterlife as he sits in his lonely cell. He thinks it might be terribly hot or cold: "thrilling regions of thick ribbed ice," he calls it - - maybe with howling winds or floodwaters. He doesn't know. Then he ends by saying, "The weariest and most loathed worldly life that age, ache, penury and imprisonment can lay on nature is a paradise to what we fear of death."

FIDELA

Fear?

KATE

Of course. We don't know. We fear.

FIDELA

I know.

DAVE

If we knew, we would still fear.

KATE

I think that would depend. Maybe it is so horrible that we would be depressed our whole life through waiting for it--

LAUREL

Like nothing. There's nothing afterwards. Maybe there's this eternal heat or cold...or starvation. Being near water but not able to drink? Pushing a rock all the way to the top of a hill, only to have it roll down and having to push it up over and over again? Who was that? Some Greek?

KATE

(getting excited, eating a marshmallow)

Yeah. I don't remember who.

(marshmallow shoots out of her mouth, hits LAUREL)

Sorry.

(picks it off LAUREL and pops it back into her mouth)

FIDELA

That was so disgusting.

KATE

What if the afterlife is a waiting room, like in one of Sartre's plays? Whatchamacallit? Yeah, *No Exit*. Nothing but people waiting, waiting forever.

LAUREL

Like that old milk commercial, after the bad man ate all the cookies?

KATE

(losing steam, lying back)

Um, kinda.

DAVE

We could put it out of our minds.

KATE

Some people would. Yes, most would and do, I think, up until the end. But you see how it could be if it were bad, the afterlife?

FIDELA

But it is good, and we sit at the right hand of God and have eternal bliss.

KATE

As you believe. In that case, when some of us were the least bit challenged or depressed, we might opt for suicide. That wouldn't be good either.

FIDELA

(gripping and looking at her cross)

God doesn't like suicides.

KATE

That's what you believe. But maybe it isn't true. I, personally, think that God likes everybody, if there is a God.

FIDELA glares at KATE.

MARTHA

We don't usually talk about these things in group. It just doesn't happen here.

KATE

Doesn't happen here? Oh, is our eventual destination off limits? Who's going to be there when we get there? Those things?

MARTHA

Well,--

KATE

What in God's name do you talk about then? What is more important at our stage of life?

FIDELA

(angry)

God is the composer—

KATE

(smiling)

Composer?

FIDELA

Composer of my mind. God is the great composer of my mind.

KATE

He tells you what to think?

FIDELA

He's telling me now not to think bad thoughts about you as I just did.

KATE

Oho, you did? How come God wasn't fast enough to squelch that bad thought before you had it?

FIDELA

Sometimes a bad thought will creep in for just a minute.

KATE

What a God. Not even omnipotent when it comes to your brain.

LAUREL

Uh huh. You go, girl.

MARTHA

(slightly threatening)

Laurel.

FIDELA

(very threatening)

Be careful, Laurel. Be very careful.

LAUREL

Just you don't tell me what to do any more, see.

KATE

"If God is good, he is not God. If God is God, he is not good." That's from *J. B.* by Arch—

MARTHA

I think that's enough.

FIDELA

You're just an amphibian, aren't you?

KATE

Excuse me?

FIDELA

You just change with the wind, with the tide. If someone says "white," you say "black."

MARTHA

I believe you mean "chameleon," Fidela. Kate, as this group's facilitator, I can't tolerate any more of your disruptive influence. That'll be enough.

KATE

(to Fidela)

You meant I'm the devil's advocate. That's what you meant.

FIDELA

I guess.

KATE

(sincere)

I'm sorry, Fidela. I just wanted you to think about something for a change instead of parroting—

MARTHA

Quite enough now.

DAVE

What kind of cancer do you have?

KATE

Esophageal.

DAVE

Isn't that caused by drinking and smoking?

KATE

Maybe. Nobody really knows what causes any kind of cancer. Maybe it's only exacerbated by those things. In China it's exacerbated by--

DAVE

We're not in China. We're in the good old Yoo Ess of Aay. Here it's caused by drinking and smoking.

KATE

(sitting up straight, punctuating each word)

Not. Necessarily.

DAVE

Hey people, listen up. You and I have been struck down in our prime through no fault of our own, and here she caused her own cancer. She has no one to blame but herself. No wonder she doesn't believe in God.

KATE

That's just not true. It's not even true. Hey, why don't you pick on Laurel? She has lung cancer.

DAVE

Secondhand smoke from her parents.

KATE

(long pause)

OK, I'm leaving. I won't be back.

FIDELA

I'm glad you're leaving. You don't fit in here. You surely don't.

MARTHA

You're leaving? But you—

KATE

Just came? Can't leave? Of course I can. It happens all the time.

MARTHA

It doesn't.

KATE

Well, it should. People don't have to stay in these groups forever. Do you think the only way anyone can leave is by dying? You know, if it weren't for your rigidity and a distinct lack of creativity, you all could be the cast of *No Exit*. Think about it.

LAUREL

You know how to exaggerate just right.

KATE

(gets up to leave)

Thank you, Laurel. That's the nicest thing anyone's said to me all—

KATE falls again, her marshmallows spilling everywhere. MARTHA gets up and feels KATE's pulse. LAUREL goes, too. DAVE sits up. FIDELA stands.

MARTHA

She's dead.

LAUREL

Oh, no.

(drapes her scarf over KATE's body)

DAVE starts to pick up marshmallows, then stops. FIDELA folds hands to pray. BLACKOUT except for a spot on smiley face poster.

MARTHA

That happens all the time.

(END)