

The *GOOD* Death

By **A**ndy **B**oyd

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... The Good Death by Andy Boyd is an emotionally charged play about the issues of dealing with an aging parent and end-of-life care. Writing with humor and grace, Boyd is unapologetic about tackling questions of faith as he draws his characters into an intimate discussion of spirituality. Although a strong Christian perspective is part of the plot, there is enough space for other points of view that even nonbelievers could join in the conversation. The characters are multi-dimensional: Nora, a daughter struggling with guilt about finding a care-taker for her dying mother, Juanita, an expert in hospice care who sees her work as a calling, and Cassandra (the role of a lifetime for a mature actor), a former teacher and sparkling intellect who is riddled with dementia and fear of the unknown. One of my favourite elements of the play is its dramatic structure – 12 scenes of varying lengths that imitate the rhythms of life, ebbing and flowing in all the right places.*

Nora:

Thank you again for doing this.

Juanita:

I had an opening.

Nora:

You mean a death. One of your patients died.

Juanita:

All of my patients die.

Nora:

Right.

Spacing is playwright's own.

The Good Death

Characters:

Nora, 50s

Juanita, 40s

Cassandra, 80s

I.

Nora and Juanita in Cassandra's living room.

Nora:

Thank you so much for doing this.

Juanita:

It's no problem.

Nora:

It's been such a steep decline. It seemed like for years it was going to be such a gradual thing but then in the last few months...

Juanita:

That's how it goes.

Nora:

Right. I'm sorry, you're a professional, you're used to this. How long have you been...

Juanita:

A nurse? Twenty-one years.

Nora:

How long in this, in this kind of work.

Juanita:

Hospice.

Nora:

Yes, yeah.

Juanita:

Five years.

Nora:

So this, you've seen a lot of this.

Juanita:

Yes. Most of my patients have some level of dementia. Almost everyone does above the age of seventy-five.

Nora:

Is that true?

Juanita:

Oh yes. Science has gotten so good at extending life, but not so good at extending brain function. So most people who die of old age die with some dementia. It's not always the cause, but it's a factor.

Nora:

God.

Juanita winces. Then she smiles.

Juanita:

Tell me about your mother.

Nora:

Okay, sure. So, Mom was a teacher. For many years. She taught middle and high school English and was elected shop steward and eventually retired to work for the union. She was one of the first generation of teachers to unionize here, back in the early sixties.

Juanita:

Wow.

Nora:

Yeah. She's very smart. She *was* very...I think she's still smart, underneath all the dementia. Ha! That's a horrible thing to say.

Juanita:

Not horrible.

Nora:

She was always very...logical. Rational. I think to compensate for how people think of English as a subject. That it's soft. Subjective. She'd always say "criticism is a science." Literary criticism, um, analyzing books. And so she prided herself on her intellect.

Pause.

Nora:

Thank you again for doing this.

Juanita:

I had an opening.

Nora:

You mean a death. One of your patients died.

Juanita:

All of my patients die.

Right.

Have you come to terms with that?

Yes. Absolutely. Why do you ask?

It's a standard question.

Is it?

Sure.

Nora:

Juanita:

Nora:

Juanita:

Nora:

Juanita:

Pause.

Nora:

Do you know I've never seen a dead person before?

Juanita:

That can't be true.

Nora:

It is. It's absolutely true. Every funeral I've ever been to was closed casket. We're WASPs.

Juanita:

Wasps?

Nora:

Oh! White Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

Juanita:

What denomination?

Nora:

Oh we're not...we're not actually Protestants.

Juanita:

I see.

Nora:

It's more of just a phrase.

Juanita:

I see.

Nora:

I've known people who have died. One of my childhood friends was hit with a car. My father died when I was in middle school. Aneurism. Totally out of the blue. And so I have understood for a long time that the world is...not even cruel but just incredibly random. But I've never...it's the physical things, the cleaning up, the washing, the...I want to preserve my mother's dignity, in my own eyes. I want to still see her as a sparkling intellect. Which is very hard to do if you're cleaning someone's shit.

Pause.

Nora:

Oh my god that was so unbelievably offensive.

Juanita:

I am not easily offended. My clients are not often at their best.

Nora:

Well sure, they're dying.

Juanita:

My patients are not my clients.

Nora:

Oh. Well, I guess what I'm saying is that I would like Mom to be comfortable. I'm not hoping for a miracle cure. I want...they used to call it The Good Death. That's what I want for her. To be surrounded by family and friends. I want it to be as painless as possible.

Juanita:

That's our goal. Palliative care. We can make it very comfortable. Not painless, but almost.

Nora:

Right. That's why I said "as possible."

Juanita:

Understood.

Nora:

Okay.

Any other questions?

No, that's fine.

Juanita:

Nora:

Juanita:

I am here twenty-four hours. I will get to know your mother very well. It makes sense for you to feel comfortable with me. So if there is anything you want to ask me, now is the time.

Nora:

No, no, you seem great.

2.

Same room, later. Cassandra lies in a hospital bed. Her heart monitor beeps. Her breathing is heavy. Juanita putters around the room, picking up a glass and taking it into the kitchen, rifling through the mail, throwing out old magazines. She sings "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus."

Juanita:

*I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus
No turning back, no turning back.*

*The world behind me, the cross before me
The world behind me, the cross before me
The world behind me, the cross before me
No turning back, no turning back.*

*Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
No turning back, no turning back.*

She folds a blanket and places it in a little pile on the couch.

3.

*Nora talks with Cassandra, still in bed.
Cassandra opens her eyes.*

Hey, Mom.

Nora:

*Cassandra looks at her, perplexed. Then,
recognition spreads across her face.*

Nora.

Cassandra:

Yes!

Nora:

How do you do?

Cassandra:

Nora laughs.

I'm fine, Mom. How are you?

Nora:

Cassandra:

I can't complain. Some of the kids are determined not to learn a thing the entire year, but I'll get through to them yet. I always do.

Oh. No, Mom, you're not teaching this year.

Nora:

Yes, I am. We're reading *Walden*.

Cassandra:

No, no, you're at home.

Nora:

Ah, that's right.

Cassandra:

You remember?

Nora:

Yes, of course.

Cassandra:

How's Juanita been?

Nora:

I don't know what you're talking about.

Cassandra:

The nurse.

Nora:

The maid?

Cassandra:

She's a nurse.

Nora:

Who's sick?

Cassandra:

Not sick, just getting older.

Nora:

Mother?

Cassandra:

No, you.

Nora:

Well, I suppose so, we all are, aren't we?

Cassandra:

Pause.

Have you seen my notebook?

Cassandra:

No, I haven't.

Nora:

Well, I've got to find it. I can't waste this entire sabbatical lying in bed.

Cassandra:

No, Mom, you're retired. Remember?

Nora:

Cassandra:

Oh. Oh. Oh yes.

Cassandra looks confused.

How long now?

Cassandra:

Twenty-five years.

Nora:

Oh yes. I retired quite some time ago. I remember.

Cassandra:

They gave you a party. At the Union hall.

Nora:

Oh yes. Yes, that's right. With cake.

Cassandra:

With cake.

Nora:

Nora?

Cassandra:

Yes, Mom?

Nora:

I don't want to die.

Cassandra:

Nora gasps, cries, shakes her head, leaves the room.

4.

Cassandra in her bed. Juanita enters, carrying a grocery bag.

Hello, Miss Cassandra.

Juanita:

Hello. What's your name?

Cassandra:

I'm Juanita, dearie.

Juanita:

That's right.

Cassandra:

I've got a treat for you!

Juanita:

What is it?

Cassandra:

Guess.

Juanita:

Um. Um. Um. Figs?

Cassandra:

Nope!

Juanita:

Candy canes?

Cassandra:

Nope!

Juanita:

Um. Um. Ummmm...mutton?

Cassandra:

Mutton?!

Juanita:

She laughs. Cassandra laughs.

Mutton!

Juanita:

I don't know! You told me to guess!

Cassandra:

What kind of a sweet treat is mutton?

Juanita:

You didn't say sweet! You said a treat!

Cassandra:

Mutton!

Juanita:

Well I don't know! When I was a child we had mutton at birthdays.

Cassandra:

Close your eyes.

Juanita:

No tricks.

Cassandra:

No tricks.

Juanita:

Cassandra closes her eyes. Juanita takes an orange out of her bag. She brings it to Cassandra's nose. Cassandra takes in the smell.

Oranges!

Cassandra:

She opens her eyes.

That's right!

Juanita:

Through the following Cassandra expertly peels the orange and eats it section by section.

Cassandra:

When I was pregnant with Nora we drove down to Cape Canaveral to see the space shuttle take off. As we drove through Florida we passed rows and rows of orange trees, and their smell filled the air and filled our car and sank into our clothing. We rolled down the windows and stuck our hands outside the car, letting the passing wind gently push our hands up, down, side, side, like they were wings, and we stopped whenever we felt like it and asked the workers for oranges, and they'd give us some, and they were the sweetest oranges we'd ever tasted, they were like candy, and by the time we got to Cape Canaveral we had a whole trunk full of them, and as we waited for the shuttle to take off we shared them with all the other people there, young, old, black, white, and we all ate oranges and watched the shuttle take off, and we kept watching until the boosters fell away and the shuttle got smaller and smaller and it shone bright like a star and finally we couldn't see it at all and we all kept watching, rapt, at the space in the sky that the shuttle slipped through.

Pause.

Cassandra:

Do you have anything sweet to eat?

Juanita:

You just had an orange!

Cassandra:

Oh right! Haha! I can still taste it on my lips! Haha!

Juanita:

Are you cold?

Cassandra:

No.

Juanita:

Do you have to go pee?

Cassandra:

Juanita!

Juanita:

Do you?

Cassandra:

No.

Juanita:

Are you sure?

Cassandra:

Yes. I don't have to pee. I should know, after all.

Juanita lifts Cassandra's blanket.

Juanita:

Ah.

Cassandra:

Oh no.

Juanita:

It's all right. Time for bath!

Cassandra:

I must have...must have been while I was sleeping, I...

Juanita:

Don't worry, we have clean sheets in the closet.

Cassandra:

Let's get this cleaned up before Nora comes home from school, shall we?

Juanita:

Yes, Miss Cassandra, I think we shall.

5.

Cassandra at night, alone.

Cassandra:

I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't WANNA die I DON'T wanna die I don't
want to die I don't I don't I don't want to die I don't WANT to I don't I don't I don't I
don't I don't want to die *I* don't want to die die die die die I don't want to die I don't
want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want
to die I don't I don't I don't *want* to die I don't want to die I don't WANT TO DIE! I
DON'T WANT TO DIE! I don't want to die I don't want to DIE I don't WANT to die I
DON'T want to die I don't want to I don't want to I don't want to I don't want to...

*She falls asleep. Juanita comes in, checks
her temperature with the back of her hand,
leaves.*

6.

Later. Cassandra is sleeping. Nora and Juanita.

Nora:

How's she doing?

Juanita:

She's doing fine, Nora.

Nora:

I feel just, you can't imagine, out of my mind guilty about this.

Juanita:

Why do you feel guilty?

Nora:

Because, well, I feel I have a responsibility to her.

Juanita:

You do.

Nora:

What?

Juanita:

You do have a responsibility to her. Your responsibility is to make sure your mother is taken care of in the best way possible.

Nora:

Right.

Juanita:

And that's what you're doing. I am very good at my job. Very good.

Nora:

Of course. I didn't at all mean to imply anything else. I just feel...I mean, she's my mother. I'm her only daughter. I'm all she has. I feel like I should...be here.

Juanita:

You are.

Nora:

I should be here more often.

No. You come more than most.

Juanita:

Really?

Nora:

Yes. Oh yes.

Juanita:

I'm only here a few times a week. How often do most children come?

Nora:

Most children don't come.

Juanita:

Wow.

Nora:

It's better this way. Like you said, let someone else handle the messy parts. Then you can handle the...

Juanita:

The messy parts.

Nora:

Juanita smiles.

Right. The messy parts. You're dealing with so much. The death of your mother. It's a profound change.

Juanita:

Thank you, that's...

Nora:

Nora begins to cry.

That's a really wonderful thing for you to say.

Nora:

She sniffles.

Fuck.

Nora:

Hey. It's okay. If you didn't cry now when would you cry?

Juanita:

Thank you. You're...

Nora:

She laughs through her tears.

You're a really good nurse.

Nora:

Juanita laughs.

I know.

Juanita:

Do you do this with her?

Nora:

What?

Juanita:

Do you comfort her?

Nora:

You mean emotionally?

Juanita:

Yes.

Nora:

I haven't much. She sleeps so much of the time. Would you like me to?

Juanita:

Would you?

Nora:

Sure.

Juanita:

It would relieve...it would make such a difference to me knowing you were doing that.

Nora:

Of course.

Juanita:

I know that's a huge amount of emotional labor to ask of you.

Nora:

It is. But I can do it.

Juanita:

Just however seems best to you.

Nora:

Sure.

Juanita:

7.

Later. Cassandra and Juanita are watching a television pastor. We can hear the muffled sound of the sermon, the call and response of the congregation. They watch for a while.

What movie is this?

Cassandra:

It's not a movie, it's television.

Juanita:

Is this *Inherit the Wind*?

Cassandra:

No.

Juanita:

Pause.

Is this *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

Cassandra:

No, it's live, it's television.

Juanita:

Oh. What is it?

Cassandra:

It's my pastor.

Juanita:

You go to this church?

Cassandra:

No, this is in Dallas. I can't go to church a lot of the time now. I have to be here, with you.

Juanita:

I'm sorry.

Cassandra:

That's all right. I like spending time with you.

Juanita:

Cassandra:
I like spending time with you. This is silly, but could you tell me your name again?

Juanita:
Juanita.

Cassandra:
That's right.

Pause.

Cassandra:
He's a very powerful speaker.

Juanita:
Yes. He's got charisma.

Cassandra:
That word comes from...

Juanita:
Greek. It means "the gift of grace."

Cassandra:
Ah. You already knew.

Juanita:
Yes.

Cassandra:
What do you think of when you think of grace?

Juanita:
What do you think of?

Cassandra:
I think of Ginger Rogers.

Juanita:
Oh yes, she was marvelous.

Cassandra:
Wasn't she? What do you think of?

Juanita:

Here's what I think of: when I was a little girl, I was in Sunday school, and the teacher asked us if anyone knew the story of the prodigal son. And I raised my hand, and the teacher asked me to tell it. And so I said there was once a rich man with two sons, and one son wanted to travel to the city, so he asked his father for his inheritance, and the father gave it to him, and the son spent it on gambling and women, and eventually he ran out of money and had to get a job feeding pigs, and he realized the pigs were eating better than he was, and he was so disgusted with himself that he decided to walk back home. And he asked for his father's forgiveness and his father granted it and spread out a banquet to welcome him back. And my teacher said, no, that's wrong. What happened was that the son walked home, and as soon as the father saw him far in the distance he came running, and he embraced his son, and before the son could say a word the father said he would kill the fattened calf and hold a banquet, for at last his son had returned. That's what grace means to me.

Cassandra:

That's a wonderful story.

8.

Cassandra and Nora.

Cassandra:

There was a man here earlier.

Nora:

Yes. That's your doctor.

Cassandra:

No, he wasn't my doctor. He was another man.

Nora:

We got you a new doctor.

Cassandra:

Why?

Nora:

Because your old doctor was an idiot.

Cassandra:

But I'd gone to him for years.

Nora:

Yes, many, many years, and he hadn't been keeping up on the medical literature, so his recommendations were not standard current recommendations for someone in your condition. Juanita told me. She's very smart.

Cassandra:

Isn't she though?

Nora:

I want you to be as comfortable, as...I want to slow the progression of this thing as much as we can. I want to make this as comfortable as possible. Are you using the helmet?

Cassandra:

Oh yes. Want to see? Juanita!

Juanita enters.

Juanita:

Yes?

Cassandra:

Is it time for helmet?

No, we already did that today.

Oh yes, I remember.

Do you?

What?

Do you remember?

What?

Never mind.

Do I remember what?

Never mind!

All right.

You don't have to yell.

Juanita:

Cassandra:

Juanita exits.

Nora:

Cassandra:

Nora:

Cassandra:

Nora:

Cassandra:

Nora:

Cassandra:

Pause.

Cassandra:

Nora:

I know. I'm sorry. It's just incredibly frustrating that I'm trying to provide the best possible care for you, but you don't even seem to notice or say thank you because haha! the disease you have means that you don't remember anything, so you don't remember the hours of wrangling with insurance companies I had to do to be able to switch your doctor to someone who actually knows what he's doing.

Nora. Darling. How's your prayer life?

Cassandra:

My *what*?

Nora:

Your prayer life. Are you praying?

Cassandra:

No, I'm not...I have never prayed in my entire life. You have never prayed in your entire life.

Nora:

I've started. Juanita and I, we pray together. And you know what? It has had a great effect. My memory is much improved. I feel energized. I feel like I'm seventy again!

Cassandra:

Yes, mother, I'm glad you're feeling better, but it isn't because you're praying, it's because you are being treated in an incredibly state of the art manner by an incredibly expensive doctor!

Nora:

Cassandra shrugs.

Who knows?

Cassandra:

Oh my god.

Nora:

Ooh, you oughtn't use His name is vain.

Cassandra:

"His"? You mean "God's" name?

Nora:

Cassandra looks fondly upward.

That's right.

Cassandra:

What are you talking about?

Nora:

Cassandra:

Nora. You're going through a lot of changes. I just want you to know that you can always lean on The Lord, and he'll carry you through.

Nora:

I need you to stop saying that. It's not God, it's me, I'm carrying you.

Cassandra:

Well, if it's anyone on earth it's Juanita!

Nora:

Who I'm paying for!

Cassandra:

I don't want to talk about this. You're being short and nasty. And common.

Nora:

Common?!

Cassandra:

Yes. It's a difficult thing for a grown-up to realize, but it's true that your mother is her own person, and you can't expect her to stay the same forever. I never expected you to call any man your father who wasn't and I never will but I've accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior and I need you to respect that decision.

9.

Juanita and Nora. They whisper so as not to wake Cassandra.

What have you been saying to Mom?

Nora:

What do you mean?

Juanita:

You talk to her.

Nora:

Of course.

Juanita:

What do you talk about?

Nora:

Well, we talk about everything. Old movies. Space shuttles. You.

Juanita:

Me?

Nora:

You come up. She loves you very much.

Juanita:

Do you talk about God?

Nora:

A bit.

Juanita:

My mother doesn't believe in God.

Nora:

Oh.

Juanita:

But today she told me she had accepted Jesus Christ as her personal Lord and Savior.

Nora:

Did she?

Juanita:

Are you surprised? Nora:

I didn't realize she was ready to take that step. Juanita:

?????? Nora:

I don't know what you're trying to say. Juanita:

"That step." Have you been, I don't know, *grooming* her for "that step"? Have you been *evangelizing* her? Nora:

Oh, no. No no no. We just talk. Juanita:

About God. Nora:

Only if she brings it up. She's very interested in the topic. It seems she's never really spoken to anyone about these things. Juanita:

About God. Nora:

Not just about God. About final things. Ultimate things. Juanita:

Death. Nora:

Yes, and the afterlife. And ultimate purpose and meaning. The big questions. It seems she's never really grappled with the big questions. Juanita:

Well, that's ridiculous, that's actually insane, because my mother read *War and Peace* in three different translations. She read metaphysical poetry like other people read the sports section. Her favorite book was *Middlemarch*! Nora:

Juanita:

Okay.

Nora:

What does that mean, “okay”?

Juanita:

Nothing. Just that I find it really helps for most patients to keep the conversation on a pretty surface level. I ask are they hungry, are they thirsty, do they need to use the restroom. And most of my patients are fine with that. But not your mother. She pokes. She prods. She wants to steer the conversation deeper than that. She wants to talk about death, and my ideas about death are bound up with my faith. I can't have that conversation without talking about God. And she finds it very comforting.

Nora:

Well yes, that makes sense, because she has spent her entire life thinking about those questions, so actually that's familiar to her. You're reading this all wrong. You think she wants to talk about these things because she never has but actually she wants to talk about them because they're all she ever thinks about.

Juanita:

Okay.

10.

Cassandra and Nora.

Nora:

Hi, Mom.

Cassandra:

Hello.

Nora:

How are you feeling?

Cassandra:

I'm fine. How are you?

Nora:

I'm doing okay.

Cassandra:

You look so familiar.

Nora:

Oh.

Cassandra:

I do think we've met before.

Nora:

Yes, Mom, it's me, Nora.

Cassandra:

No, that's not it. That doesn't ring any bells.

Nora:

Mom, it's me, your daughter.

Cassandra:

Don't be ridiculous. I'm much too young to have children.

Nora calls offstage.

Nora:

Juanita!

Juanita enters.

Yes?

Juanita:

Something's wrong with Mom.

Nora:

Well yes, she has advanced Alzheimer's.

Juanita:

She was fine last week.

Nora:

And now she isn't.

Juanita:

Mom, Mom, it's me, Mom, it's Nora.

Nora:

I knew someone named Nora once. She looked a bit like you, but younger. Much, much younger.

Cassandra:

That was me, it's me you're remembering.

Nora:

No, I don't think so. I don't think that's it.

Cassandra:

Mom, it's...Mom, do you know who you are?

Nora:

I want to tell you...

Cassandra:

Do you know who you are?

Nora:

Cassandra:
I've found out something, it's the most wonderful thing, it's name is Jesus, and he's the Man-God, and he loves me, and he made me, and that's why he loves me because he loves me with the love with which he loves himself and I love him with his own love, and that's why it's perfect, our love is a perfect circle, and Jesus the Man-God is also God the God-God who sent him, who sent himself, who is himself and sent him to earth, which he made, which he loves with a perfect circle of love, to save the earth and the man and me from the Him that made the earth that had to die, that *wanted* to die, but God didn't want

it to die, not really, he was joking when he said it had to die, so he sent himself to himself to save himself from himself, to love himself with his own selfless love and in that love to save the earth he made. Isn't that wonderful?

Nora:

Mom. Your name is Cassandra, you love Chopin and Boulez, you yelled at us if we split an infinitive at the dinner table, you voted for every Democrat except Carter because you said he talked down to women, you taught us how to diagram sentences when our friends were still learning how to read, you don't believe in God, you think people who believe in God are stupid, but you love John Donne, you...

Nora runs to a bookshelf and gets a book of Donne.

Nora:

This, this book, you must have read every poem a hundred times, you'd recite them to us at Christmas, you...

Nora flips through the book, causing a loose page to fall to the floor. She picks it up and reads.

Nora:

This is my play's last scene; here heavens appoint
My pilgrimage's last mile; and my race,
Idly, yet quickly run, hath this last pace,
My span's last inch, my minute's latest point;
And gluttonous death will instantly unjoint
My body and my soul, and I shall sleep a space;
But my'ever-waking part shall see that face
Whose fear already shakes my every joint.
Then, as my soul to'heaven, her first seat, takes flight,
And earth-born body in the earth shall dwell,
So fall my sins, that all may have their right,
To where they're bred, and would press me, to hell.
Impute me righteous, thus purg'd of evil,
For thus I leave the world, the flesh, the devil.

Pause.

Nora:

You remember, don't you?

Cassandra:

My, that's lovely.

11.

Cassandra, Juanita, and Nora. Juanita plays tambourine, Juanita and Cassandra sing. Perhaps Cassandra only sings the repeated lines. Nora sits in the corner, racked by sobs.

Cassandra and Juanita:

*He's got the whole world
In his hands
He's got the whole world
In his hands
He's got the whole world
In his hands
He's got the whole world in his hands*

*He's got you and me brother,
In his hands
He's got you and me sister,
In his hands
He's got you and me mother,
In his hands
He's got the whole world in his hands*

*He's got the rivers and the mountains
In his hands
He's got the oceans and the seas
In his hands
He's got you and he's got me
In his hands
He's got the whole world in his hands!*

*Cassandra stops singing. She falls asleep.
Juanita smiles at Nora.*

Juanita:

Now we wait.

12.

After the funeral. Nora and Juanita are dressed in black.

Nora:

You had no right.

Juanita:

To...

Nora:

No right to do any of that. To proselytize to her. To evangelize her. To take advantage of a dying woman. You didn't treat her like a person. You treated her like an object for your charity.

Juanita:

You're angry with me.

Nora:

Yes.

Juanita:

Why?

Nora:

Because you took away my mother!

Juanita:

Nora. Your mother was dying.

Nora:

Dying, not dead! Her mind was a fog, it was almost impossible to find her, the real her, and then you made it impossible, you put this religion into her head and it took root somehow and bloomed and spread and blocked out the sun, and the last time I talked to her it wasn't her at all, it was like a computer program spitting out random code. It wasn't a spontaneous, certainly not a *graceful*, use of language to express a subjectivity, it was a screen. A screen between her and reality. A screen that you put there.

Juanita:

I did exactly what you asked.

Nora:

WHAT?

Juanita:

You said you wanted your mother to have a Good Death.

Nora:

Yes.

Juanita:

She had one. She was happy. Smiling. No fear. I have seen many, many people die. And the ones who face death without fear are the ones who believe. Art, poetry, these are good things for the living. But the dying need God.

Nora:

You're a medical professional.

Juanita:

Yes.

Nora:

This is completely, utterly...outside of...

Juanita:

You asked me to comfort her.

Nora:

I wanted you to keep her company, not change her personality!

Juanita:

I comforted her the best way I knew how. The Lord God is the only comfort I have ever known. What else should I have given her?

Nora:

I can't believe you.

Juanita:

No, tell me. What should I have offered?

Silence.

Juanita:

I believe I have a message that every person needs to hear. That was created for every person. That every person was created for. And that message is that God is real, and he loves us, and he loves us so much that he died for us, and if we believe that simple truth, we will live forever. She told you she didn't want to die and you ran out of the room.

Nora:

I tried. I tried the best I could.

Juanita:

Yes, I know. You saw your mother as “a sparkling intellect.” But what good is intellect when faced with the mystery of death? What comfort can secular humanism give to a woman afraid of death?

Nora:

Not “humanism.” Humans. People. That’s what makes a life. Not fairy tales, not your invisible friend in the sky, the actual, tangible relationships between people. What you did was prevent me from having the final conversation every child deserves to have. “I’m sorry. I love you. I forgive you.” Never happened.

Juanita:

And you think that’s my fault.

Nora:

Yes! You made it impossible for me to reach her!

Juanita:

On your terms.

Nora:

On hers! You took away my brilliant, incisive mother and you replaced her with a stranger.

Juanita:

She could be quite brilliant. She stumped me a few times.

Nora:

Oh, fuck you.

Juanita:

Why are you so determined to reject God’s love?

Nora:

Because love that doesn’t do anything isn’t love! Love that heals the rich and lets the poor die of medieval diseases, love that sends hurricanes to smash through Haiti and die out before they reach Florida, love that gives children cancer and old women Alzheimer’s, that is not a love I want anything to do with. The problem of evil isn’t a problem, it’s just reality: chaos, emptiness, physics. That’s all there is.

Juanita:

God is calling you.

Nora:

Tell him to lose my number.

What if I'm right?

Juanita:

What if.

Nora:

Then I saved your mother from eternal damnation.

Juanita:

Hah!

Nora:

An eternity of torture and pain. Of loneliness. And no way to ever escape.

Juanita:

That's your God. That's the God you love.

Nora:

And if I'm wrong, I saved her from weeks of the same. Nora, you weren't here.

Juanita:

I was.

Nora:

Not like I was. Not all the time.

Juanita:

Because you said I shouldn't be! You said she was better with...oh my god. This was your plan. You did everything you could to cut me off from her, to make her dependent on you, and then when she started to forget who she was you said, here, have this identity, try this on. That's why you told me I didn't have to visit more. That she'd be better off with you. So you could have her all to yourself.

Nora:

Nora. You're grieving. I understand. But I'm not a bad person.

Juanita:

How many times?

Nora:

What?

Juanita:

How many patients have you done this to? Five? A dozen? *All of them?*

Nora:

Juanita:

I can do it for you.

Nora:

How many?

Juanita:

I can comfort you as well. There are all kinds of Christians. You don't have to be my kind if you don't want. You're tired. You're weighted down by sin. Let Jesus take your burden. Lay your burden at his feet.

Nora starts to sob.

Juanita:

Nora. You will see your mother again. Pray with me, Nora. Pray.

Juanita lays a hand on Nora's shoulder.

Juanita:

Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...

End of play.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *For this play, I was inspired by spare, claustrophobic plays like Caryl Churchill's A Number and Ayad Akhtar's Invisible Hand. I often write big, sprawling historical epics, so I thought it would be a fun challenge to limit myself to three characters with very little back story struggling over a complex problem, in this case the mental decline of a woman with Alzheimer's. I was also thinking a lot about the ethical complications of care work. My spouse is a childcare worker, and the lines between the personal and the professional get very blurry in that field: is it okay to tell someone else's baby that you love them? Elder care presents similar challenges. Care workers often form complex emotional bonds with their clients, and those bonds can be some of the most significant relationships these people have as they face the unfathomable reality of death. I have looked at this play from many angles, but currently the most interesting one to me is Juanita's: how do you help someone prepare to die? Really, how?*

AUTHOR BIO: Andy Boyd is a playwright based in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. He is a graduate of the playwriting MFA at Columbia University, where he studied with David Henry Hwang, Lynn Nottage, Charles Mee, Kelly Stuart, and Doug Wright. His plays

have been produced, developed, or presented at IRT Theater, Pipeline Theatre Company, The Gingold Group, Dixon Place, The Kennedy Center, Roundabout Theatre Company, Epic Theatre Company, Out Loud Theatre, Naked Theatre Company, Contemporary Theater Company, The Trunk Space, Columbia University, Marquette University, and Harvard University. He is the host of the New Books in Performing Arts Podcast and the co-host with Danny Erickson of the socialist theatre podcast Better than Shakespeare.