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## **GOOD NIGHT IRENE**

by Annette Holmstrom

Irene's head was smushed up against the base trim, and only one of her eyes worked. Mags draped over her back, kneading Irene's shoulders with his chunky black paws. She felt the paw massage, but her legs were numb. At least she wasn't dead yet, unless Mags and his putter purrs served as a heavenly welcome just for cat lovers. The last thing she remembered was checking off her to-do list, and then – nothing.

Mags hopped on her back like this most days, but that happened up in bed; not here, never here. And most days, Mags shadowed Irene everywhere, even to the bathroom. Richard referred to the ally brawler as the 'black shadow' and demanded that Iguana Busters trap him for removal when they swept the yard for iguanas. Irene, and Iguana Busters, both said absolutely not.

Irene's cheek lay on the kitchen floor, which was tiled in a shade her kitchen designer, Heather, called Frozen Daiquiri.

*I could down a stiff daiquiri right now, she groaned.*

Or thought she groaned, but no sound came out. Not good.

She tested her memory:

*What do I remember about frozen strawberry daiquiris? Let's see, first I pre-chill my pretty pink hurricane glasses in the Sub-Zero. Then I slush the ingredients together in the blender with ice, pour, and head to the back garden with a drink in one hand and a beach read in the other.*

She conjured her tropical oasis in her mind's eye: purple orchids sprouting on the trunks of swaying palm trees, Spanish moss dripping down, the warm tropical air. So she still had her memory. Good.

Voices floated over the fence - her neighbors Doug and Kathy. A holler died in Irene's throat. She could still hear, though. Good.

"I think she left this morning. Won't be back 'til after hurricane season, so brace yourself for the pool parties. Suppose we should have let Irene and Richard know about the keg deliveries?"

Kathy laughed. "I didn't see anything. Did you? Such a high fence! Can't see a thing over it. Oh maybe we should have, but the help deserves a slice of Key West paradise too - can't afford the rent increases, that's for sure. After they deported all those gardeners last spring, I mean, doing our part for One Human Family, right?"

"I detest that slogan." Doug slapped his fist, hard, on Irene's tall white fence. "Well this - this - WALL keeps the cops from seeing those backyard blowouts, at least."

The smack of Doug's fist on the fence brought Irene right back to the newspaper incident. *Maybe that's why they didn't tell us about the beer kegs.*

Before the teardown, Doug had implored Richard to save the white picket fence at least, but no. Richard thought the neighbors would love his two-story modern box design once they saw it, even its impenetrable fence inches from the property line. He was a genius at investments,

Irene knew, but clueless about people. Except for the grandchildren, of course, whose faces lit up like stars when he boomed into the room.

A tear trickled out of Irene's one working eye, down her cheek.

The newspaper incident set Richard off for days, since he suspected Doug wrote this in the *Citizens' Voice*:

“Maybe Key West needs a new ordinance, prohibiting high fences in historical neighborhoods. Oh, and maybe another ordinance banning tear-downs to make room for cold empty rich people's second or third homes. No more neighborly chats over the fence with this monster on our block.”

Moneyed Key Westers in Irene's charity circles gossiped hard about that incendiary blurb, and someone finally tracked down the author, who was not Doug. Still, Irene felt awful about it, even after Richard pointed out that the locals were shocked, shocked about it all, until they sold their childhood homes for piles of cash. Then not so much.

Irene covered for Richard's brusqueness with cookies at Christmas, and 'hi how are you' waves. Last year her home designer suggested a Tennessee Williams-themed light display, since Tennessee's old house was just a couple doors down. Ronaldo helped her run blinking pink flamingo lights up the palm trees, and they tacked laminated *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* movie posters on the fence, along with a huge banner: DUNCAN STREET SAYS MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL! Their yard won third place in the Key West Holiday Lights & Sights Contest, but still, the neighbors avoided them.

Kathy was talking again. “Now that Richard is gone - may he rest wherever – maybe we should reconsider. Irene's nice enough when she's here. Remember those cookie plates? So

yummy – you stole all my fudge bourbon balls. And remember how hilarious she was in the nursing home one-acts? She made dying funny, got to give her that.”

*The one-acts. Of course, the one-acts! Darn right. I can make people laugh, so I deserve to LIVE.*

She strained to lift her left hand an inch or two, and waved it around a bit. Mags shifted his position in response before settling back in, purring.

The *Citizen* referred to the triple-bill of Williams’ later works as *The Last Gasp Plays*. Theater troupes seldom performed these gallows-humor one-acts, and Irene understood why when she reviewed the scripts. Beyond grim but potentially hilarious, in a dark twisted way. Key West adored its dead literary legends, though, so patrons filled the seats.

Irene’s favorite role was that of wheelchair-bound Lucretia, in *This is the Peaceable Kingdom or Good Luck God*. In the play, horrified nursing home visitors recoiled when Lucretia the truth-teller pointed out the obvious: loss of bladder and bowel control, adults with diapers changed like infants, residents sitting in soiled beds overnight. When Lucretia shouted, “*Incontinent! That’s where it begins and when it should end,*” the audience murmured in agreement, every show.

*But wait, Irene wondered. How long have I been here, immobilized on the floor? Did I have to pee? Did I already pee and not know it?*

Kathy again. “And who knows, maybe now that she’s free from awful Richard she’ll be more fun. And maybe she needs us – I mean, she’s alone.”

*Yes. Yes! I need you, Kathy. I don’t care about the kegs. I’ll make cookies twice a day. I can be fun.*

Irene struggled to lift a leg off the floor, her head from the tile, her slippered foot up into one of those gentle yoga poses. Nothing.

Except her left arm, the one with the hand she could wave. After three attempts she moved that arm up, then down over the floor, a one-armed angel's wing swing.

Mags leaped away at the motion, flicked his tail, then sat down to glare at Irene. A sudden high-pitched whirring noise erupted from the corner as Mags scrunched down into his pounce crouch. Baby Shark's tinkling wakeup tune reverberated through the room, as the robot vacuum advanced.

Irene loathed everything about that vacuum except her name for it, but she had no clue how to vacuum without it and hadn't pulled the plug yet. Richard set up all of the electronics - the security doorbell, music playlists, lights, phones. Yet she knew this: It must be Tuesday, and it must be two p.m. since that's when Richard scheduled Baby Shark to vacuum the downstairs rooms, whether they were in town or not.

The answering machine clicked on. She insisted on installing a landline because of Hurricane Irma, when cellphones died and people lined up for hours to call out on the few landlines still left in town. Her real purpose for the landline, though, was to avoid the cell phone, with its bewildering apps and screens.

"Hey Mom, hope I didn't miss you, just want to let you know we're sending up massive prayers, and I hope the spa escape helps. Just know we'll be holding your hand when we put Daddy's ashes in the vault next week. God must have taken Daddy away from us because he needed him more, since God always has a plan. He has a plan for you too, Mom, never forget that. Hugs and kisses - Love you so so much."

The message clicked off as Irene furiously tapped one of her good fingers on the tile. *Well I hope God's plan for me includes an ambulance, Julie. Hope you prayed for that.*

Irene and Richard raised the kids to vote Republican, but they forgot about Jesus. Never should have let Julie go to that Bible camp. Julie's Jesus obsession was beyond annoying, much more annoying than if she voted for Democrats.

*How could Jesus do this to me, Julie, now of all times? Any time?*

Baby Shark butted up against Irene's good arm as she tried to wave him away with her good hand. Bump, bump, bump. Once Baby Shark confirmed she was the obstacle, he pivoted off to clean the rattan floor rug by the plate glass window.

*That stroke drug, you had to take it in three hours? Two? Five?*

Irene flung her good arm out as far as she could, reaching for something, anything to toss, maybe break the window. She had to at least try.

Ah! Her hand closed on the to-do list, and the pen right next to it. She could still read, thank heavens:

TO DO

~~stop paper delivery~~

~~put cat out/lock cat door~~

ashes

~~empty washing machine~~

~~water indoor plants~~

Her fingers had tingling dead spots, so she made four fumbling attempts before she flipped the list over to its blank side. She positioned the pen and slowly scratched out with her left hand:

911

IRENE

Helr

Since she was right-handed the letters squiggled every which way. Irene didn't quite finish the 'p' in HELP but it was the best she could do.

Mags was perched on the rug glaring at her again, as Baby Shark buzzed down the hall into the downstairs guest bedroom. Now she just had to wait until Mags came close enough.

Seven hours later, she woke up as bright porch lights flickered on.

*Thank God. Saved!*

But no. The lights went on because Richard programmed them to come on at 9:00 pm. The pool lights blinked on five minutes later. Someday she planned to figure out all the devices: Aleza something? An app, her kids said? Or maybe she'd just smash them to pieces and slice their power cords into tiny bits.

Mags nudged her arm with his nose. He licked her elbow, her good hand. Irene reached for his collar, and it took her 15 minutes to wrap the to-do list around it. Mags seemed to think her fumbblings were chin scratches so he purred through it all, then settled down next to her.

*Mags! GO OUTSIDE!* her mind commanded.

Irene heard a click followed by lilting violins. Jimmy Durante's gravelly voice joined the strings:

“You must remember this, a kiss is still a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh.....”

Richard's nighttime playlist had only three songs on it: *As Time Goes By*, *Stardust*, and the one she wept through, every night since Richard died: *Goodnight, Irene, Goodnight*.

This meant it was ten o'clock, though, and Mags should be leaving soon. He always left by ten. Right on time, Mags padded away in the direction of the cat door, with the note tucked close to his neck, off to prowl as darkness fell.

Sunlight streamed through the skylights. She woke up to hear Ronaldo out back, hooking up the hose to fill the pool.

*Ronaldo, help me - I'm dying right here on the kitchen floor, can't you see me?*

But of course: The arguments about the privacy window glass. She told Richard they didn't need it, that it was just silly.

*I was right – see, Richard? See?*

Jose's leaf trimmer roared to life, and Irene lamented the fact she was going to die accompanied by the buzz saw of yard equipment, the music of Key West's neighborhoods on any weekday morning. After today, Ronaldo and Jose wouldn't come back until next Wednesday.

*How long can a human go without water? Three days? four? A week? The house cleaner? Another week. Insect control? Just came Monday. Anyone?*

No one she could think of. So Irene drifted off into mental list making: funeral attendees, songs for the service, the flowers. Definitely no coffin. She smiled inside at the memory of that other one-act, *The Frosted Glass Coffin*, where she decided to give her character Betsy Fletcher a sweet, helper-type vibe. Mrs. Fletcher finally gave up on poor Mr. Kelsey and joined the line for breakfast. Mr. Kelsey just wanted his dead wife back, and Betsy couldn't do anything about that. So she walked away.

*Well, a frosted glass coffin doesn't sound half bad right now, compared to this kitchen floor hell I'm trapped in.*

Irene raised her hand again and barely waved, just to make sure she still could.

By midafternoon the neighborhood quieted again, as voices floated over the fence. She heard the words ‘Tennessee’ and ‘Duncan’ which meant they were tourists, who often wandered their street in search of Tennessee’s house.

“It’s a black cat. Aw....here kitty kitty.”

“Does he have a name? Check his collar – here kitty, kitty.”

“It says ‘Maggie’ – it’s a she. Oh I get it, Maggie the Cat. Get it? For the Tennessee Williams house. That’s so cute. Here girl, pretty kitty.”

*Check the note, people.*

“Hey guys, there’s a note that comes with the cat.”

“What’s it say?”

“Somebody’s to-do list. Hey, I used to have one of those once, but we’re on vacation now, right?” The voices drifted away up the street.

*Where’s the note? Please God or Jesus or whatever, Irene prayed, could you make sure they tucked the note back under Mag’s collar before they walked away?*

It was the only plan she had, not like her at all. She always had millions of plans. Maybe something was wrong with her brain, after all.

Later, Irene startled awake to hear someone stumbling into the patio furniture. Mags was beside her so it wasn’t 10 pm yet, and a shadow blocked the backyard spotlight.

*Trevor! Oh thank god, Trevor.*

She forgot about Trevor.

Trevor was Richard’s bar buddy, and he sounded drunk, as usual. Irene had promised him the last of Richard’s stash of top-shelf booze, and Trevor knew where the house key was (in the

conch shell) and knew how to silence the alarm, since Richard asked him to check the house sometimes when they were up North.

“Oh shit.” Irene heard Trevor’s curse, then a crash, then a small splash.

“Ah now. Damn it to hell. Huh. Well, I’m sure as hell not wetting myself to get that key now, ‘ya hear, Richard? And Richard, I know you’re dead but you always knew every little thing so you probably can hear this. I don’t need your stinkin’ rich people booze, ‘ya know? ‘Cause I know where you keep the outside booze. Didn’t know I knew that, did ‘ya, Richard? I know lots of stuff, Richard, that ‘ya don’t know I know. So g-night, Richard. Forever, I guess.”

Irene heard bottles clinking as Trevor rummaged through the outdoor cabinets, then a patio chair scraping over the brick.

“Hi there, kitty. What’s that, buddy, around your neck?” Here, kitty kitty. Let’s see. Now why would Irene put her to-do list around your neck? Mean thing to do to a cat, to saddle ‘em with a rich lady’s life.”

*Turn it over, turn it over,* she begged drunk Trevor.

“Huh. Hey Mags, why don’t you just mosey on down the block with me for a nightcap? All this fancy booze – I can’t drink it alone, can I? C’mon, kitty. Let’s go. No? I’ve got free fish guts for ‘ya, guy. Ah, come on. Have it your way then – your loss, you mangy old fat cat. Oh here – you can have your lady’s to-do list back, too, serves you right.”

Irene heard nothing for a minute, then Trevor’s shuffling steps across the deck.

“There you go Mags – you’re all wrapped up with the rich lady’s to-do list,” he laughed. “Richard would have loved that - he hated your guts, Mags, ‘ya know.”

Irene heard the gate latch click, as the sound of lilting violins filled the room. Instead of leaving to prowl, Mags came back inside and climbed on Irene's still warm back, kneading and purring. He stayed with Irene, long after *Goodnight, Irene, Goodnight*, finished out the set.

No one would find her in time if Mags didn't go outside. Irene could see the headlines now: "Community Actress Dies on Duncan Street, Cat Sleeping On Her Back."

Distant voices woke Irene up. "Tennessee' blah blah. "Duncan" blah blah. Her mouth was sand-dry, her head throbbed.

*Am I dying of thirst now?*

Probably. Irene prayed to God (that monster) to please put her in a coma right now, so she could check out the easy way.

*Maybe I should just do a Betsy Fletcher – just walk away, give up, and go to breakfast.*

*Quit trying, and just let go. Maybe it's time?*

She heard the tourists, though, and that last tiny ember of hope burned in her brain.

"Aw, pretty kitty. Here kitty kitty. So cute – check out the black cat, guys."

More tourist mumbling. Then:

"Hey guys, read this.....Who's Irene?"

THE END