

Chicken Salad

a drama in one act

by

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Cast of Characters

Carol Ryan - 34, a widow remembering.

Norma Walinski - 56, her mother.

Setting

Carol's suburban condo, May 1989.

For the Dwyer girls,
Jane, Chic, Elaine & Pat

CHICKEN SALAD

At Rise: Tight spot up on a young woman, dressed casually in jeans and a pullover.

CAROL

I'm glad you caught me on a good day. Everyone told me it would get better over time. And it has. It really has. On a good day, like today, I can go for twenty minutes at a time without coming back here. (Lights begin to rise around HER.) Not yet! (Lights fade back down.) Oh, go ahead.

Lights up on a small galley-type kitchen UR, a dining area C and an entrance hallway UL. There is lots of counter space between the kitchen and dining area. The furnishings are HUB/Marlow Dutch Colonial.

CAROL

We lived here the whole time we were married. And two years ... almost two years, before that. The move out was all planned anyway. We were going to need more space. Another bedroom. (Picking up a "pregnancy puff.") I was pregnant at the time. With Betsy.

That was the worst part, I think, for the cop. (Donning the puff.) I was just over eight months when he came to the door. He didn't have good news anyway, but I could see it got a lot worse for him when he saw I was us.

"Mrs. Ryan?" he said. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he said. "There's been an accident," he said.

"Jack?" I said.

"Mr. Ryan. Yes, ma'am."

"Bad?" I said.

"Is there someone who can drive you to the hospital?"

"Of course there is," I thought, "but he's already there."

So I called my brother. Who is not stupid. Up until he and Jack became friends he was always my "stupid little brother." Just a reflex, really. He has kept me going since that night. But this isn't about him.

It's not even about Jack. How can you tell a story that isn't over?

No. This is the story of the last time I ever spoke to my mother. This is how it happened. But you really have to see for yourselves.

(BLACKOUT)

Lights up as CAROL and her mother, NORMA, enter from the hallway UL. CAROL is in a dark, subdued maternity dress while NORMA wears the severe black of conspicuous mourning. NORMA has clearly recently been weeping.

CAROL

Here ma, have a seat.

NORMA

Are you really not having people back?

CAROL

Really. I've seen enough of people in the last three days.

NORMA

People can be such a comfort. It's good for them, too. I could pick up the phone, your Aunt Dottie'd be here in a flash.

CAROL

I'm sure.

NORMA

I think she was little hurt not to have been invited back to the house.

CAROL

No one was invited back.

NORMA

Maybe some of those girls you work with ...

CAROL

Ma, you're here. That's all the company I need.

NORMA

Oh, dear ... I don't know that I'm much comfort ...

CAROL

You want me to put on a pot of tea?

NORMA

You got anything else in?

CAROL

Coffee? Ginger ale?

NORMA

Since no one is coming back, maybe we could go ahead and relax. Have a little drink.

CAROL

What's that stuff you use?

NORMA

Rye.

CAROL

There's a bottle of that left from Easter. (Moving into the kitchen.) Somewhere.

NORMA

Tell me where to look. Don't be bending. Don't be reaching!

CAROL

Okay. Okay. You'll have to, there's no way I can get down that low. (Pointing) The cabinet under the stove.

NORMA (bending and searching)

Are you sure.

CAROL

Maybe behind the waffle iron?

NORMA

There it is. The bitters down here, too?

CAROL

No. They're up with the powdered sugar.

NORMA (standing with some effort)

Oh god ...

CAROL

You okay?

NORMA

Fine, dear. Ooooh ... maybe a little dizzy. I guess I shouldn't be bending like that either.

CAROL

Here. Give me the bottle. You sit back down and catch your breath.

NORMA

Now I didn't come back here so you could wait on me.

CAROL

Whatsa matter? You don't trust me to make an Old Fashioned?

NORMA

I should be taking care of you.

CAROL

I'm feeling fidgety, ma. I need something to do anyway.

NORMA sits watching CAROL as SHE assembles the makings of an Old Fashioned from cabinets and the refrigerator.

NORMA

It was a nice-sized crowd at the church. Shows you Jack was well thought of.

CAROL

That doesn't come as a surprise to me.

NORMA

Now, honey, I thought the world of Jack, once I got to know him.

CAROL

You want ice in this?

NORMA

Yes, please.

CAROL takes ice cube trays out of the refrigerator.

NORMA

For just one glass, can't you use the ice-wootchie on the door?

CAROL

We never use it. Jack can't stand the noise it makes. (SHE is still for a moment.) Anyway, they breakdown so easily ... I don't want to get used to it and then one day not have it, y'know?

For just a moment the only sound in the kitchen is of CAROL stirring the drink, popping ice cubes from the tray and dropping them into the drink.

NORMA

I still remember how many people came out for your Daddy. And the house was full afterward. All three nights of the wake.

CAROL

I remember people in the house until 2 a.m.! That's why I asked Cindy to have people in last night. (Touching her abdomen.) This one and me need our sleep too much to have that. Besides, this place isn't big enough for all the people who were at Cindy's.

NORMA

People would've squeezed in.

CAROL

People would still be here from last night.

NORMA

People just want to be a comfort, honey.

CAROL

The air would still be thick with smoke.

NORMA

I know it's awful for you, dear. Believe me, I know. But you should let people try to help. You're going to need them down the road.

CAROL

Wait. Does this get water or something?

NORMA

Just a splash. Think of the mess I would've been in if I hadn't let people help me out. I wouldn't have a job if I hadn't let Dale Comminsky help me out. Checker was a good job then, too. We made decent money. Not like these kids today! No wonder they can't get decent ones to work. I started eight years ago for more than they're starting kids today. And the damn union wonders why the new ones aren't hot to join up! They sell people out, but they still want those weekly dues. I wonder about the whole world sometimes.

CAROL (handing NORMA the drink)

Here you go.

NORMA

Thank you. What's that you're having?

CAROL

A little ginger ale.

NORMA

A little shot in it might help you relax.

CAROL

No, ma. Really.

NORMA

Or a little glass of wine?

CAROL

Sorry. She doesn't drink.

NORMA

She? You know?

CAROL nods.

NORMA

I thought you wouldn't let them tell you?

CAROL

Jack knew.

NORMA

When did he tell you? How long have you known? How could you know and not tell me?

CAROL

I've only known since Tuesday.

NORMA

Oh dear ...

CAROL

Actually, I guess it was Wednesday morning by the time we got around to the car.

NORMA

The car?

CAROL

He was hit head on, remember? Nothing in the trunk was damaged. When we had the sonogram, I told him I didn't want to know. He couldn't believe it. But I didn't. I don't know. It just didn't seem right. Like we were violating the baby's privacy somehow. I wanted to look forward to finding out? I don't know. I read that poor man the riot act before the doctor told him. "No slips," I said. "No hints. No clues. No little blue ribbons. No little pink bows. No pronouns." He kept his word. He never let on. Except that fool had the trunk of his damn car stuffed with dresses and little pink sweaters and a 4-foot teddy bear with a huge pink bow ... (catching herself) ... So, my guess is we're having a girl.

NORMA

You still not smoking either?

CAROL

Don't tell me you've gone back.

NORMA

No. I'm just amazed at how careful you girls are today. I guess 'cause you start having them so late. Or you know more than we did. I managed to have two healthy ones, thank god, without it being such a trial.

CAROL

It hasn't been a trial for me.

NORMA

She will be. I hope you'll be ready to let people help when you start needing it.

CAROL

I really haven't wanted to smoke or drink. I just lost the desire completely. Poor Jack didn't. He didn't smoke here. He didn't smoke in front of me at all. He wanted me to think he'd quit, too. I used to think up little errands he could run on his nights off so he could get out for a cigarette. I guess it's really true that people who quit smoking live longer.

NORMA

That was a nice spread at your church hall.

CAROL shrugs.

NORMA

I didn't see your Aunt Dottie's angel food cake out.

CAROL

She brought the banana cream pie.

NORMA

Oh. For your daddy she made angel food. There seemed to be a lot of macaroni salad. Different kinds, but a lot.

CAROL

They call it pasta salad now. It's very big.

NORMA (nodding)

I see it in all the magazines. Where did Edna Sweeney's "Scripture" cake end up?

CAROL

I have it here. You want some? You hungry? There's plenty here. Cindy made me bring it all back with me last night. Most of it's stuff that I won't eat anyway. It's all either too sweet or too heavy. I guess you don't think of a small salad and some broiled fish for a covered dish offering.

NORMA

People try to bring their best.

CAROL

You didn't bring your chicken salad.

NORMA

No. I didn't bring anything. You told me not ... Oh dear! ... Should I ... Did you want me to ...

CAROL

No, ma. I was just teasing.

NORMA

There was chicken salad there. Several kinds. That one with the grapes and almonds. And the curry.

CAROL

No, thank you!

NORMA

That green musty one.

CAROL

Pesto.

NORMA

I haven't made chicken salad in ages.

CAROL

That's what I was just thinking.

NORMA

I don't think I've made it since your father died.

CAROL

And he was the one who didn't like it!

NORMA

That's not true.

CAROL

He fussed every time you made it. "Seems like a lot of damn trouble to go through for a meal that isn't even hot." "Why cook a damn chicken so you can chop it up and serve it cold? Why not just have a damn roast chicken?"

NORMA

He just liked to tease.

CAROL

Who?

NORMA

Your daddy. Sometimes you and Buddy took him too seriously. He was a great kidder. (CAROL is incredulous.) He worked around beef all day. Chicken made a nice change.

CAROL

He cut up chicken parts, too, ma. A butcher in a grocery store does poultry, too.

NORMA

Well, you children liked it.

CAROL

Yes, ma.

NORMA

And we had a roast every Sunday. I had to do the best I could on what he brought home. So sometimes it had to be chicken salad. He wouldn't eat ground beef. We couldn't afford steak seven nights a week. Not that he wasn't a wonderful provider. I never worked a day outside our home while he was alive.

CAROL

You were very lucky.

NORMA

We had 29 wonderful years.

CAROL

It was nice of Aunt Margot to come all the way down from Burlington.

NORMA

You and Buddy are the only family she has left.

CAROL

I hadn't thought of that.

NORMA

Shame it's taken her so long to learn that she needs to put herself out a little for family. She certainly didn't do a thing for your father when he came out of the service. And it's not as though she and Roy didn't have the resources. If she'd shown a little faith in her own brother, he'd have had his own shop instead of having to spend his life working for others.

CAROL nods absently and murmurs a non-committal assent.

NORMA

Did you say that you had some leftovers from last night?

CAROL (moving toward the kitchen)

Sure. What would you like?

NORMA

Now you sit. I can serve myself.

CAROL

No ma, really. I can't sit too long anyway. I will be so glad when this baby comes, if only to be comfortable for more than 15 minutes at a time.

NORMA

With everything you've been through, I can't let you wait on me.

CAROL

You'd rather I sit brooding?

NORMA

Of course not. At least let me get plates down. I can't stand to see you reaching.

CAROL

Just get one.

NORMA

You're not having anything?

CAROL

I ate at the church.

NORMA

You picked. I watched you.

CAROL

I'm sure.

NORMA

I know you don't feel like eating. You never could eat when you were the least little bit upset. But you should have a little something. For the baby.

CAROL

Ma, please! I'm damn careful about the baby. You've said so yourself. Don't use that!

NORMA

Make an old woman happy. Let me make up a plate for you. You don't have to eat a bite. But let me have the satisfaction of making a plate for you.

CAROL

Ma ... Most of this stuff isn't good for us anyway.

NORMA

So play with yours while I'm eating. How many times in your life does your mother say you can play with your food? Don't pass up this opportunity.

CAROL

Please ma, make me a plate!

NORMA (peering into the refrigerator)

I'm happy to, honey. Here, you can have these nice carrots and cauliflower ...

CAROL

They're pickled, ma.

NORMA

There's this stuff of Naomi's you seemed to like ...

CAROL

Humus. All right ma, put a little humus out for me.

NORMA

Here, take the bowl over to the table. What are you doing?

CAROL

There's pita in the drawer. I don't have to bend or reach to get it. I don't like humus enough to eat it off a spoon. (SHE takes the humus and pita to the table.)

NORMA

Oh good, there's some of that wonderful lasagna left.

CAROL

There are two and a half pans of lasagna left. Did people think I was opening a lunch wagon?

Let me just flip the oven on. NORMA

No. Oh my god! NO ... CAROL

Honey, we don't want to eat it cold. NORMA

Don't use the oven! CAROL

Is there something wrong with the oven? NORMA

Just get away from the oven! CAROL

Carol, what is wrong with the oven? NORMA

You can't use the oven. CAROL (who is now blocking the oven)

Tell me! Right now! What's the matter? NORMA

You can't use it. CAROL

Carol? NORMA

I can't tell you ... I can't ... You won't get it. CAROL (stepping away)

What is this? What's in here? (removing a plate) A plate? Chicken? Rice? Green beans ... NORMA (at the oven)

Oh god ... CAROL

What's the big deal? NORMA

That's Jack's dinner ... CAROL

Oh honey ... NORMA

CAROL

He was coming home from work, remember? I was heating it for him when the cop came to the door instead.

NORMA

Honey ... You can't ... Jack's not ...

CAROL

I know that. I know. Just put it back for now.

NORMA

Honey ...

CAROL

Back. Just put it back.

NORMA

It won't work.

CAROL

I don't care.

NORMA

You have to face ...

CAROL (dry ice)

In my own way. In my own time.

NORMA

It'll go bad sitting in there. It'll smell. You'll get bugs.

CAROL (still ice)

Then I'll let it smell and I'll welcome the bugs.

NORMA

Honey, that doesn't make sense

CAROL

What does? What the hell does? Does it make sense that Jack's dead? Does it make sense that he wasn't even two miles from here? Does it make sense that he wasn't wearing his goddamn seatbelt? Put my husband's dinner back in the oven and don't talk to me about sense.

NORMA

Okay, honey, okay. I've put it back. It's back.

CAROL (sitting)

Thank you.

NORMA

Can I put on some tea? Is there anything I can get you?

CAROL

I could use a little more ginger ale, I guess. Or if there's apple juice, I'll take that.

NORMA

There's apple juice. (bringing juice and a fresh glass to the table) Here you go ...

CAROL

Thanks.

NORMA

Does Dr. Martell know how upset you are?

CAROL

She knows what happened. She was at the wake last night. I assume she knows I'm not happy about it.

NORMA

Maybe she could prescribe something...

CAROL

I don't want anything!

NORMA

Something to help you relax ... that wouldn't hurt the baby.

CAROL

If I was relaxed there'd be a problem. I don't think I should feel good about this.

NORMA

But you keep so much bottled in ...

CAROL

I know what I feel without spraying it all over the church.

NORMA

She was a bit much, wasn't she?

CAROL

Who?

NORMA

His mother.

CAROL

I was not criticizing Betsy Ryan, ma.

NORMA

Oh, but really ...

CAROL

You weren't exactly stoic ...

