

BREAK

SCENE: A BREAK ROOM IN A SUITE OF COMPANY OFFICES. THREE WOMEN SEATED WITH COFFEE. THEY ARE ENGAGED IN TASKS: SOLITAIRE, COUPON CLIPPING, ETC.

ALICE

Next time, I'm going to ask her when she plans to retire. Just to make conversation.

BEATRICE

They can't wait till you walk out the door. When am I going to retire? When I get goddam ready to retire. That's when.

ALICE

Where's Muriel? We can't start without her.

WENDY

She's here. I saw her in the women's this morning.

BEATRICE

Well, I hate to get started, but we'd better. Muriel will be here any minute. Do we all have our orders? Wendy, could you do the honors?

(Wendy takes out a paper and pen. She computes during the following.)

BEATRICE

I've got everything but the Rich Coral lipstick. They sent Ruby Rich by mistake. I hate when that happens.

WENDY

Well, let me look at it. Maybe it will be OK. Do you think it will go with amber and beige?

BEATRICE

Perfectly, honey. But if you don't like it, I'll send it back and get the other for you.

ALICE

So, I've got the Girl Scout cookies. Wendy, that's \$9.50. Beatrice, that's \$14.00 even.

BEATRICE

And I've got the gourmet pretzels. Bea and Alice, that's \$5.37. Each. Wendy, you owe me \$7.50. Unless you want me to send the lipstick back. Muriel, moisturizer and seaweed soak. That's \$12.32.

WENDY

Beatrice and Muriel each wanted a plush Elvis and a teddy. Discounted at \$23.00. Alice, I've already given you the duck, but you still need to pay me. Eleven, please. Let's see. What's the damage? Wait a minute. Hold on. There, I'm ready.

(She gives each one a post-it with their tab on it.)

OK. I owe Alice \$3.00. Alice, you owe me \$5.37. Bea, you owe Alice \$9.50. And you owe me \$15.50. Muriel owes you \$12.32. And Muriel owes me \$17.63.

BEATRICE

Wait a minute. Wait a minute. That doesn't sound right. I thought Muriel bought gourmet pretzels, too.

WENDY

No, just the seaweed soak and the moisturizer.

BEATRICE

Well, I have pretzels for her. I can't return them.

ALICE

I'll take them if she doesn't want them. For when the kids come over.

BEATRICE

Oh, I can keep them. I just can't let Herb know they're in the house.

(Muriel enters. She is furious. She goes to the cart. Looks everywhere on it. The others react.)

MURIEL

Where's my coffee mug? Where's my coffee mug? Did one of you take my coffee mug? I paid good money for that mug! Where is it?

ALICE

Muriel, nobody took your mug. What's wrong?

MURIEL

Nothing's wrong! Why does something have to be wrong? I just want my mug! The only thing that's wrong is that I can't find my goddam mug!

ALICE

Did you look around your desk? I saw it there this morning.

MURIEL

Of course I looked around my desk! What do you think I am, an idiot?

ALICE

There's another mug over there. It's clean. Yours will turn up. Things always turn up.

MURIEL

Things don't always turn up! They get lost! There are things in the world that get lost! And you can never find them! Things get lost! I want my mug!

(She starts to break down, hyperventilate. They get up and try to calm her down.)

Things get lost. Just when you think you have a coffee mug, you don't have it any more. It's lost. Someone takes it.

ALICE

Here, sit down. I'll get you some water.

MURIEL

I don't want water. I need some coffee.

ALICE

That's probably the last thing you need, darling.

WENDY

Besides, your mug isn't here.

MURIEL

(Starting to cry again.)

I don't know what I'm going to do. I had that mug for ten years.

ALICE

(Bringing her a paper cup with coffee.)

Here's what you're going to do. You're going to drink a little coffee and tell us what this is all about.

MURIEL

I don't want to talk about it.

WENDY

(Bewildered.)

Isn't it about the mug?

ALICE

You have to talk about it. We're your friends. Come on. You'll feel better. Take a few deep breaths.

MURIEL

(She tries breathing. Sips a little coffee.)

I don't think I have any breath left in me.

ALICE

Muriel, tell us where you were. You're never late. We started the accounting without you. We didn't get very far.

MURIEL

I was in hell. That's where I was. I was gathering my things together and Fox stopped me. She asked if I could stick around for a minute. Then all these suits showed up. I thought, oh my God. What's happening? Then she stands right next to me and whips out a piece of paper. She says some twaddle about how long I've been here. They're all looking at me, smiling those oily smiles. So goddam insincere. Most of them don't even know who I am. Burton does, because I used to work for him when he was down here. I'm sure we both said good riddance when he went upstairs.

WENDY

My God. Did she fire you? Right in front of all those people?

MURIEL

Of course not. Even Fox is smarter than that. She has a big smile on her face. She starts reading from a piece of paper. I can see it's very official looking, with swirly letters and signatures. I'm so frozen, I don't even take it in for a few minutes. She finishes and hands me this thing with the biggest shit-eating grin I've ever seen. I take it. Burton says, "Speech, speech." I say, "I'm overcome. I don't know what to say." Because I truly didn't know what to say. Burton wipes an imaginary tear from his eye. Fox tells me to take the rest of the day off. And they all disappear. Then I look down at this thing. I want the floor to open up so I can just fall through and go straight to hell. I look for my mug. Nowhere. I go through the outer office and people are staring at me, their heads turning as I pass. Girls, I've never known such shame.

WENDY

What was it? What was on the paper?

MURIEL

Here. Read it yourself.

(She throws a few scraps of torn paper on the table. Beatrice grabs the scraps and starts putting them together.)

BEATRICE

"Whereas, Muriel Burns has served this community for forty-two years." Let's see, blah, blah. ". . .most improved employee of the year." Signed. The President. The Chairman of the Board. Burton. Fox. And it says you are getting a check for a thousand dollars! Muriel! A thousand dollars! Where's the check?

MURIEL

In my purse.

WENDY

Honey, you could buy a hundred mugs with that.

MURIEL

Girls, I'm going to tell you something. Then I forbid us to talk about it again. I can't take talking about it. Not today. No more talking after I tell you.

THE REST

We promise.

MURIEL

I thought nothing would ever push me out of this place. But this is the last straw. I've decided to retire.

THE REST

What?

MURIEL

I've decided to retire.

BEATRICE

What do you mean?

MURIEL

I've decided to retire. Retire. As in get a gold watch.

WENDY

When?

MURIEL

Soon. Next Friday will be my last day. Now, that's enough said.

BEATRICE

Next Friday? You can't leave so soon! You've got to give us six weeks at least. There are lunches to be planned. Male strippers to hire.

ALICE

Anyway, you can't retire. You're not nearly old enough.

MURIEL

I'm sixty-eight.

ALICE

You're a kid. I'm seventy-two.

BEATRICE

And I'm seventy.

WENDY

I'm sixty-seven, but I'm sticking it out until I'm at least a hundred and five.

ALICE

I thought we had decided we'll all stay on till the day we kick off. Just out of spite.

MURIEL

I must have missed that conversation. What a dumb thing to decide. When did we decide that?

ALICE

Well, we never actually decided. I just thought that's where we were headed. Not giving an inch. Honey, we've been breaking together for close to forty years. That's a lot of coffee and cookies.

WENDY AND BEATRICE

Yeah.

(Slight pause.)

BEATRICE

Who's going to keep tabs on our purchases? Who owes what to who?

MURIEL

You'll be fine. Any idiot can operate a calculator.

ALICE

What brought this on, girl?

MURIEL

Most improved! Most improved! After forty-two years. Just because I stopped calling her an incompetent idiot. She's half my age and has half my brains. Forty-two years. Where's my dignity? Send me to employee assistance!

BEATRICE

You have to give as good as you get in this place, I always say. You don't see mine getting away with that sort of thing. He knows I'd smack him up the side of the head. One day he says, you treat me like you're my mother. I looked him square in the eye and I said, don't you forget it either! You can't give them an inch, honey.

ALICE

Muriel, sweetie, maybe you'll snap out of it, huh?

MURIEL

I'm not snapping out of it. I'm leaving. Now, let's leave it alone. Let's have a real break. With real conversation and some real fun. Please!

(They sit there for a few seconds,
uncomfortable, drinking their coffee.)

BEATRICE

God, it's times like this when I wish I could have a cigarette!

WENDY

Oh, Bea!

BEATRICE

It used to be different here. There were ashtrays on the break room tables and on all the executive desks. That's what everyone did. Had a smoke during their break. Everyone was more relaxed then. Nicotine: it's better than Prozac. Everyone said how bad it was for them, but everyone smoked. God, it was wonderful. Do you know what I have to do to have a cigarette? Where I have to go? Down to the cargo bay in the back alley. Have you ever been there? It's disgusting. I go down there only if I'm desperate. How do I cope? I wait till I get home and then I smoke almost a whole pack between the moment I get in the apartment to the moment I get on the bus in the morning. Is that a healthy way to live? I ask you.

WENDY

Bea, you know smoking is bad for you. Why don't you have a piece of fruit? Or even a chocolate bar?

BEATRICE

And gain a hundred pounds in two weeks? No thanks.

(Pause.)

WENDY

Muriel, you should sue. I would.

MURIEL

Don't you know you can't sue anyone here. It's in our contract. You can't sue them for saying you were the most improved employee of the year. No judge would take a case like that. Now let's leave it alone. You promised me we wouldn't talk about it.

(Another short pause.)

BEATRICE

Did you see Court TV last night?

THE REST

No.

BEATRICE

Neither did I.

(A cell phone rings. Beatrice takes her time pulling it out of her purse.)

BEATRICE

Yes, Mr. Braithwaite? Yes. At nine o'clock. I put them on the credenza. Next to the coffee tray. Where you told me to put them. On the left side as you look in the mirror. No, I wasn't trying to hide them. I know you were kidding, Mr. Braithwaite. Yes. No problem, Mr. Braithwaite. We were just having some girl talk. You know us girls. Good-bye, Mr. Braithwaite. Same to you, Mr. Braithwaite. Up yours, Mr. Braithwaite.

(She folds the phone and puts it away. Looks innocently at the rest. They are looking at her in shock.)

I hit the off button a long time ago, sweeties.

(Laughter. Another uncomfortable pause. Wendy starts to say something, but thinks better of it.)

ALICE

Joey and Rita brought the kids over on Sunday. I never thought I would have great-grandchildren. When you're raising your own, you never look that far ahead. You're so busy wiping their butts. You never think, "My kids will have kids and then those kids will have kids. And I'll still be billing people for stomach pumps." Anyway, they've gotten so big. Cute as a button. But Jerry got real impatient. You'd think he'd be happy to see them. He says he just can't stand the noise any more. He wanted to watch basketball. Basketball is more important than his own blood. He wants to move to one of those gated communities when I retire. Then he can tell everyone to stay the hell away. Some life, huh?

WENDY

Why don't you visit them at their place? Leave him at home.

ALICE

I'll tell you where I'd like to leave him. Under that ridiculous gravestone that he's already got picked out.

MURIEL

Just walk out. That's what I did.

ALICE

You had a good reason. I don't. Where would I go? Walk out to where? Even if I wanted to walk out, which I don't, where would I go? Don't think I don't fantasize about it. But fantasy is one thing. Actually doing it is another.

THE REST

Yeah.

MURIEL

Day off! I'm going to stay the rest of the day, just out of spite.

ALICE

You're not going to give back the check, are you?

MURIEL

Are you nuts? We're going to Las Vegas with that check. Spend the weekend. We can do a lot of damage with a thousand.

ALICE

Honey, you can't leave. You've got too much imagination. You're our leader. Who'll organize us?

MURIEL

I can organize us from 252 Edwards Place just as easily as here. Second weekend in January. We're going to hit Vegas. Wayne Newton, here we come!

THE REST

Yeah!

MURIEL

Now, one last time, let's drop it. No more talk about retirement. What we're going to do in retirement. Too dull. Somebody has to have something funny to talk about.

(Another pause.)

ALICE

(Picking up a magazine.)

What's important in a man?

(They groan.)

ALICE

Here's a test to determine what you think is important in a man. For example, is it more important that he be tall or sensitive?

WENDY

Tall.

ALICE

If he's tall, do you prefer thin or fat?

WENDY

Medium.

ALICE

That's not an option.

BEATRICE

Thin, of course.

WENDY

Well, not of course. I think those pudgy guys can be cute. Give me a nice tall pudgy brute who will destroy anyone who looks at me the wrong way. He can watch football all day long if he wants. I have other things to do anyway. He can watch football and then take me to bed and ravish me once a week.

BEATRICE AND ALICE

Only once?

WENDY

That's all I need. That, and I may need him to change a light bulb or hang a picture once in a while. Otherwise, he can just sit around storing sperm just for me.

ALICE

(She looks back at the questionnaire.)

Would you rather your man had a large intellect or a large penis?

BEATRICE

(There is a brief pause while they think about the question. Bea reaches for the magazine.)

Let me see that! It doesn't really say that!

ALICE

But I had you fooled for a second there, right? I don't suppose you want to hear the next question?

THE REST

No!

ALICE

I can't figure out what to get for my daughter-in-law for Christmas. You know, the one who hates my guts.

WENDY

I'm sure she doesn't hate you.

ALICE

She dumped my meatloaf in the garbage. That was pretty hateful.

BEATRICE

It wasn't a whole meatloaf, Alice. You said that yourself.

ALICE

It was enough meatloaf that Jerry could have had a couple of sandwiches from it. He likes it on rye bread with ketchup.

BEATRICE

You're going to give him a heart attack or worse, feeding him like that. I've got Herb on a strict low-calorie senior diet.

You know, like the different kinds of pet chow you see lined up at PetsMart? You see the puppy, and then the young adult dog, and then the mature dog, and then the one that is getting on in years, and then there's Herb. The old, old dog with gray whiskers on the front of the package, still frisking around. That's Herb.

ALICE

Anyway, I've decided to give her a foot bath. Let her figure out what that means. Dump my meatloaf!

(Brief pause.)

WENDY

I have a cousin who's very difficult to buy for. I can't get her clothing or jewelry or anything that will touch her skin. She's allergic to everything. One year I got her one of those fancy jigsaw puzzles. She called me up to report that she'd been sneezing for three days, ever since she opened the box. Imagine calling someone up to say something like that. When I get a gift that I really hate, I keep my mouth shut. I could be at death's door, and I would keep my mouth shut. I gave her an air purifier last year. But that sort of thing seems so impersonal.

(Pause.)

ALICE

You won't reconsider? Muriel?

MURIEL

I don't think so. Look, girls, I have to retire some day. The way I calculate my retirement benefit it's almost 100% of my pay now.

BEATRICE

You haven't been to Personnel about this? Asking them to calculate for you? It'll be all over the building in ten minutes.

MURIEL

No, my dear. I have a calculator, remember? I can calculate these things on my own. So I figure, why do I have to schlep in here every day when I can get the same money sitting on my ass at home? What I save on bus fare will more than offset the retirement check shortfall.

WENDY

Oh, that is so sad.

MURIEL

What is?

WENDY

I just had a flash on you sitting around on your ass all day. Friendless. So lonely.

MURIEL

It was a figure of speech, Wendy. And I'm not friendless. I have plenty of friends. I garden when I actually have some time to. And maybe I'll get a boyfriend. Maybe I'll have an interesting life. Things have got to improve. Now let's stop talking about it. Please.

WENDY

When my mother died, I thought things would be different. I hated to lose her, but I thought, well, now I can have a life. I thought, maybe I can meet a guy. It didn't matter who, really. As long as he's kind. I didn't care. I had it all worked out. He would insist that I retire early and come to live with him in his house. He would have a rec vee. A big one, with a warm shower and a cozy bed in the back. We would spend a month at home and then a month on the road. Back and forth. There was a man down the street. Mr. Travis. I never called him Lloyd. He had a rec vee. He never took it out of the driveway after Mrs. Travis died. So many times, I looked down the street at that rec vee. If he was outside, I waved at him. And he always waved back. One day he motioned to me. To come down the street. My heart was beating like a school girl's. He was going to make an indecent proposal. I knew it. I would tell him that I had to think it over. But I already knew my answer. Yes, I'll come with you. Anywhere. See the fall foliage? Sure. The desert in bloom? Count me in. The beach? I'll just have to buy a bathing suit and bring a lot of sunscreen. Venice, Italy? But we can't take the rec vee to Venice. No, silly. We would take a plane. First class. Champagne. Caviar. How could I tell him I didn't like caviar? I vowed not to tell him. It would be my secret. I would spread just a little caviar on my cracker and smile with delight as I popped it in my mouth. Then I would quickly wash it down with champagne. Then he would take my hand. And we would fall asleep while the movie played. And we would wake up in Venice. "Good morning, Mr. Travis." "Good morning, Miss Warn. Are you in the mood for some mischief?" I nearly swooned right there in his driveway. "My daughter stopped by yesterday and gave me a box of cookies. They look absolutely sinful. I can't eat them with this diet. I was hoping you would take them off my hands before I rip open the box and completely fall off the wagon." I managed to pull myself together. "Sure. It would only be the neighborly thing to do. I'll take them to work and share them." He went in the house and came back out with the cookies. "Thank you, Mr. Travis.

I'm sure my friends will love these." I walked on wobbly legs back to my house. Well, there I was. Mama was dead and not a whole lot was different.

ALICE

I remember those cookies! Fancy shortbreads with little ribbons of chocolate. They were very tasty.

WENDY

My point is, you think things will be different. But they probably won't.

(Pause.)

ALICE

(Near tears.)

I'm worried about us. What's happening? You girls are the only reason I come to work every day. You think it's easy to drag these old bones out of bed at 5:30 every morning? You think I like my job? It sucks. Big time. That's what Joey says about everything. Sucks. Big time. I'm not even sure whether that's dirty or not. Is it dirty? I don't care. The whole thing would suck without you girls.

BEATRICE

We should go on a cruise together.

MURIEL

That's the ticket.

BEATRICE

But not a non-smoking one, please. I want to go up on deck and smoke cigarettes and cigars and pipes and chew tobacco until I get sick. And I want to meet some men.

WENDY

What about Herb?

BEATRICE

Let him find his own men.

(Pause.)

ALICE

This is for real, isn't it, Muriel?

MURIEL

Yeah. I wouldn't kid you about something like this.

ALICE

Well, I say we try to raise as much hell as we can before you leave. Show them what the old girls have got.

WENDY

I'd like to pour super glue into that golf bag. I can just see the look on his face when he gets out there with his high-powered friends and goes to select just the right club.

MURIEL

Girls, girls. You know we won't do any of that stuff. We've got something called character. Character. An old-fashioned concept. But then we're old fashioned girls. Girls. Women. Old women. Ancient women. Crones, some would say. To the young ones, we must look like their grandmothers, only a lot meaner. The men look right through us. We hold no promise of sexual misadventure for them. We are in no one's fantasies. What a relief! If there is any poetry in old age, that's it. To be self-sufficient. We choose to enjoy each other's company because we like each other. We don't want to let each other go. I don't want to let you go. I'll let the mug go. That's just a thing. But I won't let you go. Here's what I really want to say. Let's enjoy each other. We don't have to talk about our relationship or how much we like or need each other. I'm so tired of analytical talk. During our final years, let's just behave. And through our behavior, we'll show each other how much we care. And one by one, we'll leave the group to go and lie under a headstone. "She had character." That's what I want mine to say. "She was a good friend."

(They clasp hands around the table.
Pause.)

We'd better get back to work.

ALICE

We're gonna miss you, kid.

MURIEL

None of that kind of talk! You promised.

(Pause.)

We'd better get back.

ALL

Yeah.

(They get up, gather their things.
Wendy gets a paper towel and takes a quick swipe at the table. They put their trash in the can.)

WENDY

My niece is selling chocolates for the Women's Group at church. I'll bring some in. Only fifteen dollars for a full twelve ounce box.

BEATRICE

Fifteen dollars a box! I can remember when you could get a box of chocolates for a dollar fifty. And Herb was still too cheap to buy me one.

ALICE

And, with no disrespect to the church ladies, what's full about twelve ounces? A pound. Now that begins to be full. Why don't they sell things in pounds any more? You go for a pound of coffee at Kroger's and it's thirteen ounces. Who do they think they're kidding?

WENDY

So, no chocolates?

ALICE

No, bring them in. We can at least sample them. I'll bring pictures of Joey and Rita's kids from when they came over. They're so cute. And you'll see Jerry scowling in the background. That'll be a rare treat for you.

MURIEL

See you all tomorrow then?

ALICE

I'll be here.

WENDY

So will I.

BEATRICE

(The last one out the door. She looks around the room.)

Where else am I gonna go?

(She leaves in silence.)

END

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