

THE GREAT NURSING HOME ESCAPE

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT

By **Nathan Hartswick**

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THE GREAT NURSING HOME ESCAPE

By Nathan Hartswick

SYNOPSIS: From a locked-down nursing home in the dead of night, they attempt the greatest escape ever. Join this misfit band of “inmates” as they hatch a master plan to escape their dreary nursing home and find something far more important than a baseball game – they find their youth. Watch as their best-laid plans go awry with hilarious results! This group of characters will charm you as the ringleader, the gossip, the grouch, the airhead, the Casanova, and the shy old gal with a surprising amount of moxie put their talents to the test. Funny and heartwarming, this single-set, easy-to-produce play is sure to entertain – and to remind audiences of the importance of a youthful sense of adventure.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 MEN, 5 WOMEN)

- ALBERT (m) Charismatic leader. New at the nursing home.
Retired military. (97 lines)
- LIBBY (f)..... Grouchy old lady who likes to complain.
Used to work at the Department of Motor
Vehicles. (59 lines)
- EDWINA (f) Talkative gossip. Enjoys meddling in others’
affairs and knitting. (50 lines)
- STELLA (f)..... Dimwitted and naïve. Former cheerleader
who thinks she’s still “got it.” (31 lines)
- GINO (m)..... Large, jolly man. Theatrical. Fancies himself
an educated, sophisticated Casanova. Former
limo driver. (55 lines)
- MARGE (f) Shy, sweet old gal who enjoys painting.
(21 lines)

MS. FLETCHER* (f).....Prim and proper, caring nurse. Runs the day-to-day operations of the nursing home.
(14 lines)

GUARD* (m).....Young, idealistic man who works nights guarding the nursing home. Has no idea what he's in for. (8 lines)

* Can be played by an adult/older student, if desired.

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SCENE 1

AT RISE:

Lights come up on the activity room of a nursing home. Downstage center is a card table where an elderly woman (*LIBBY, the grouch*) sits playing solitaire. There is an empty chair at the table across from her.

Upstage right on a slight angle is a wall with a large set of French door-style windows that open in toward the stage, with a wide, sturdy windowsill a few inches off the floor. The windows are closed, and a black curtain hangs behind them. (Optional: a landscape scene can be placed in front of this curtain for Scenes 1, 2 & 4.) *GINO, an ascot-wearing intellectual, gazes out the windows, leaning on a walker with tennis balls on the legs.*

Upstage left is a cot, in which the dimwitted *STELLA* is propped up reading a romance novel. Downstage left is an easel with a half-finished painting of a landscape on it, which *MARGE, the shy one, dabs away at.* Downstage right, *EDWINA, the gossip, sits in a rocking chair knitting a scarf.*

We watch the tedium of the old folks' day for a long 10 seconds. Someone coughs. Finally *EDWINA* speaks, without looking up from her knitting.

EDWINA: How's yer bunions today, Libby?

LIBBY: Awful. It's these darn slippers they give us. How's yer indigestion?

EDWINA: Terrible. When are they gonna learn you can't feed old people fried chicken? It don't agree with my delicate system.

GINO: Speak for yourself. I adore fried chicken.

LIBBY: Oh, Gino, you'd eat fried cardboard if it came with tartar sauce.

GINO: I most certainly would not. (*Dreamily.*) But cardboard in a nice béarnaise sauce...

STELLA: (*Dimly.*) Oh, is that the special today? Delicious. I hope there's pie as well. I do love blueberry pie.

LIBBY: The food here is for the birds.

EDWINA: And there's no entertainment. They should bring in a crooner once in awhile.

STELLA: Or the circus! I adore the circus.

GINO: They lack the financial wherewithal here. Some might even call them cheapskates.

EDWINA: Some?

GINO: I include myself in that company.

LIBBY: Anyone else freezing? It's always cold in here.

MARGE: I'm actually quite warm.

GINO: (*Eager to agree with MARGE.*) It is quite toasty, isn't it, Marjorie? Shall we get a breeze going? I'll open a window.

He tugs on the window, which is locked.

EDWINA: Gino, you know they lock the windows here.

LIBBY: It's freezing. It's like an ice box.

EDWINA: It is. I'm knitting this scarf just to keep from turning into a popsicle.

LIBBY: (*To herself, playing solitaire.*) Now where am I gonna put this one?

MARGE: (*To EDWINA, re: the scarf.*) That scarf is turning out very nicely, Edwina.

LIBBY: Oh, that goes here. Now I just need a four.

EDWINA: (*To MARGE.*) Thank you, dear. You're always so complimentary. You really do think everything's nice, don't you?

MARGE: I suppose.

GINO: (*Trying too hard.*) Well I think that's nice.

EDWINA: (*To MARGE.*) And how's the painting coming?

MARGE: (*A beat; she studies it.*) Nice.

LIBBY: This is a bore. I wish people would visit us more often.

STELLA: A lot of good that would do. I don't recognize them when they do.

LIBBY: It's too cold, there's no entertainment, nobody visits...why, they're just letting us sit here and wither away.

GINO: It's a travesty!

EDWINA: It's a tragedy!

LIBBY: It's the truth! This place is like a prison.

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MS. FLETCHER, a poised, middle-age nurse, enters briskly.

MS. FLETCHER: Hello, folks! How are we all doing today?

With no trace of their former griping, they are immediately as nice as pie.

ALL PATIENTS: *(Ad lib.)* Oh fine, wonderful, quite well, thank you, beautiful day, isn't it? etc.

MS. FLETCHER: Well, that's lovely to hear.

MS. FLETCHER places a small paper cup on the card table, then bustles around the room as she talks, tucking in bed sheets, adjusting the patients' lap blankets, wiping a smudge off the window, etc.

MS. FLETCHER: Here are your vitamins, everyone. Don't forget to take them so you'll have nice strong bones. And Gino, don't you go stealing them all again before other people can have any.

GINO: I wouldn't dream of it, Ms. Fletcher. And have I told you how lovely you look today? A vision in white. Did you change your hairstyle? It's ravishing.

MS. FLETCHER: *(Dismissing the compliment.)* Thank you, Gino.

MS FLETCHER's back is turned as ALBERT, the charismatic new resident, enters. He is dressed in a robe and slippers but also wears a fedora. He sets down his suitcase and gives a little salute.

ALBERT: Officer on deck! Reporting for duty, ma'am.

MS. FLETCHER: Oh hello there! You must be Mr. Dickinson. *(Shakes his hand.)* Let me take your suitcase for you, sir.

ALBERT: No, no – I can handle it myself, thank you. And please, do call me Albert.

MS. FLETCHER: All righty. Welcome to our little family. Everyone, this is Albert, our newest resident.

ALBERT: *(Warmly.)* Howdy, folks!

ALL BUT MS. FLETCHER AND ALBERT: *(Politely, ad lib.)* Hello, welcome, nice to meet you, etc.

MS. FLETCHER: Why don't I introduce you to the whole gang? This is Miss Stella, former Miss North Carolina, 19...what year was it, Stella?

STELLA: I don't recall. I think Cary Grant was president.

ALBERT: (*Kissing STELLA's hand.*) Charmed.

STELLA: (*Giggling.*) Oh, my.

MS FLETCHER: Over here we have Gino, former limousine driver and our resident intellectual.

GINO: (*Offering a limp hand to ALBERT.*) A pleasure, I'm sure.

ALBERT: (*Shaking it vigorously.*) Nice to meetchya, Gino.

MS. FLETCHER: Gino is something of a ladies' man, aren't you Gino?

GINO: Why, that's a ridiculous charge! And yet how can I take offense to it, coming as it does from such a stunningly gorgeous creature?

MS. FLETCHER: Over here with the knitting needles is Edwina, and if you want to know anything about anyone here, be sure to ask her.

EDWINA: Are you calling me a gossip? Ha! That's what the other nurse says. Susan. She says I'm a gossip, but no one believes her. (*Whispers loudly.*) She lies. (*Normal voice.*) Also, her daughter failed college. And her hair isn't really red. (*Whispers.*) She dyes it. Tsk tsk tsk.

MS. FLETCHER: This artist extraordinaire over here is Marjorie.

ALBERT: Hello, Marjorie.

MARGE: Hello.

EDWINA: She's the shy one.

ALBERT: What are you painting there, Marge?

MARGE: Oh, just...a field. A park, actually. Near my hometown in Indiana.

ALBERT: That's very nice.

GINO: Isn't it? That's what I said. It's very nice.

MS. FLETCHER: Last but not least, we have Libby here, who had a lengthy career at the Department of Motor Vehicles before she came to us.

EDWINA: Which explains why she's such a grouch.

LIBBY: Oh, shut your pie hole.

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STELLA: Yes please. Blueberry, thank you. (*Confidentially, to ALBERT.*) I do love pie.

MS. FLETCHER: Well, I think that's everyone. I've got some things to attend to. I'll be back soon – everyone make Albert feel welcome, mm-kay?

MS. FLETCHER exits. ALBERT hangs his hat on the back of the chair opposite LIBBY, but remains standing.

ALBERT: So, Libby, whaddaya like? Gin rummy?

LIBBY: Pardon?

ALBERT: Up for a game?

LIBBY: I'm already playing.

ALBERT: Not for long. You have a two on the first pile and an ace on the fourth. Move 'em to the third stack and the game's over.

He has seen all this upside down, indicating it confidently, without pointing.

LIBBY: Listen, Mr...?

She looks down and realizes he's right. She places the final two cards and gathers up the deck.

ALBERT: Colonel Albert T. J. Dickinson, United States Navy, retired, at your service, ma'am. Stationed for the previous five years in my son Robert's basement. Given an honorable discharge this morning at oh-eight-hundred hours.

LIBBY places the deck in the center of the table and indicates the empty chair opposite.

LIBBY: At ease, Colonel.

ALBERT: Excellent. I'll deal.

He puts the suitcase down, sits in the chair, scoops up the deck and shuffles it.

ALBERT: Don't worry, I'm an easy opponent; my memory is going. All you gotta do is tell me you won and I'll believe you. *(He chuckles.)*

EDWINA: So Albert, this your first time in the clink?

ALBERT: The clink?

GINO: You'll have to excuse Edwina's brusque approach. She is inquiring whether you have ever been in a home before.

ALBERT: Ah, I see, the brig! Nope, first time.

ALBERT deals the cards and begins playing a game of gin rummy with LIBBY.

EDWINA: You'll get used to it. How's your tolerance for boredom?

ALBERT: Why? You folks bored?

GINO: We could use a tad more intellectual stimulation.

STELLA: *(Excitedly.)* Last week we made scrapbooks.

LIBBY: What are we, kindergarteners? Anyone with scissors and glue can make a scrapbook.

STELLA: I can't even use scissors.

EDWINA: Why, arthritis?

STELLA: *(Innocently.)* Nope, just never learned.

LIBBY: Probably best not to have you using sharp objects.

ALBERT: Well, if you're all so bored, why don't we do something really exciting?

LIBBY: Such as?

GINO: They lock the doors and windows here, Colonel; we're a trifle limited in our options.

ALBERT: Well, I don't know. What's something you loved, something you never do anymore? What do you miss about your old life?

STELLA: Ooh, I miss cheese.

ALBERT: All right, not exactly an adventure, but it's a start. What else?

EDWINA: I miss my beagle, Sammy.

LIBBY: I once ran a marathon. Quite the experience. Wish I could do that again.

ALBERT: All nice ideas, but let's try to think of things we can do. Perhaps —

MARGE: (*Wistfully, to herself.*) You know, I miss...

They all turn and look at MARGE, surprised to hear this shy woman say anything at all. A beat while they all wonder what she might say next.

ALBERT: You miss what, Marjorie?

MARGE: (*Gently touching the painting.*) I miss this.

STELLA: What's that?

MARGE: When I was eight years old, my father put my younger sister and me in our old Ford pickup truck and took us to our first baseball game. It was a group of handsome young men from our town playing in the park. They weren't professionals, but oh, how we loved it. Every Saturday for the rest of the summer, we begged Poppa to take us to the park to watch those young men play. When I remember those days...the smell of the grass...the crack of the bat... That's what I miss. Yes sir, I do miss that.

Another pause while they all process this lovely little moment.

GINO: We have to go to a baseball game!

ALBERT: Now, that's the spirit!

EDWINA: Gino, you said it yourself – we're locked in here. How do you propose to –

GINO: Darn it, you're right. But I sure would love to see a good old-fashioned ball game.

EDWINA: I haven't seen one in ages.

ALBERT: Why not? What a grand time it would be!

GINO: Goodness, yes...why, to get out...out with that crowd –

STELLA: I'd buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jacks.

GINO: I don't care if I EVER come back!

LIBBY: Sounds like a fool's errand.

EDWINA: I agree.

GINO: It does seem quite impossible.

MARGE: We could get in trouble.

ALBERT: Listen, we're troublemakers anyway. Why do you think we're all here?

LIBBY: Because we're old?

ALBERT: Because we're a bunch of misfits! We're the kind of people who rock the boat! Rebels! "Stick all the bad eggs in one basket," I'll bet that's what they said.

STELLA: Ooh, yes, please. I'll take mine over easy. With cheese. (*Confidentially, to ALBERT.*) I do love cheese.

ALBERT: Only they didn't count on us forming an elite special forces team.

EDWINA: An elite what?

ALBERT: Listen, my grandson, Robert Jr. – he plays first base for the [NAME OF LOCAL BASEBALL TEAM].

LIBBY: Your point being?

ALBERT: We should bust outta here. Make a great escape and go to that baseball game!

ALL OTHERS: (*Ad lib.*) Oh no, I don't think so, that seems risky, we shouldn't do that, etc.

LIBBY: Listen, Colonel, you're new here, I understand that. Let me explain something to you. Most of the time we don't even leave this room.

ALBERT: That doesn't mean we can't have new adventures. Once upon a time every one of us was a fearless youngster, living life to the fullest! Now what, we're useless? Just because we've got a couple more wrinkles?

LIBBY: I'm more wrinkles than skin at this point.

ALBERT: A handful of liver spots?

EDWINA: (*Inspecting her forearms.*) It's like a map of 16th century Europe here.

ALBERT: A little less hair?

GINO: I do have more hair in my ears now. I consider that a win.

ALBERT: (*Continuing his rant.*) **ALL OTHER PATIENTS:** (*Ad lib*) Mm-hm. I have that. Oh, False teeth? Bad ankles? Bad knees? Bad elbows? Loss of memory? Digestion problems? Chronic arthritis? Psoriasis of the liver? Hurts the worst when it rains, etc.

ALBERT: Loss of memory –?

EDWINA: You already said that.

ALBERT: Already said what?

EDWINA: "Loss of memory."

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ALBERT: I did? Hm. Must've forgot. Anyway the point is, just because we're a little long in the tooth, that doesn't mean we're worthless and worn out! Let's show 'em we've still got some spark left, huh? Let's show 'em we've got memories left to make! Let's show 'em they can take away our dignity, but they can't take our moxie! Whaddaya say, are you old fogies with me? Who wants to bust outta this place and make a great escape?

Instead of cheering, everyone just stares at each other. LIBBY breaks the trance by looking down at her cards, discovering that she has a winning hand she hasn't noticed. Reflexively she throws down her cards, saying:

LIBBY: Oop! Hey, lookit that! *(Knocks the card table.)* Gin.

BLACKOUT.

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SCENE 2

We hear the group bickering. As the lights come up, LIBBY, EDWINA, STELLA, GINO and MARGE are standing around the card table. GINO's walker is still upstage near the window, one tennis ball missing from its legs. The rocking chair has been repositioned downstage right, facing a wall next to the window. ALBERT sits in the chair idly tossing a tennis ball, which hits the floor, then the wall, then returns to his lap (a la Steve McQueen). He repeats this as the others loudly voice their opinions on the plan. The vitamins that were on the table are gone, and in their place is a large, homemade blueprint. Everyone points at it.

ALL EXCEPT ALBERT: *(Ad lib, all at once.)* That'll never work! There's a stairwell here! No, we should take the elevator! Who gets to drive the getaway car? I want to do it! You can't, you ran into that parking meter last year, remember? etc.

LIBBY: Come on, people, let's focus on the plan. What are going to do if somebody catches us?

EDWINA: Does anyone have a tranquilizer gun?

GINO: That seems slightly cruel.

EDWINA: What? I said a *tranquilizer* gun.

LIBBY: *(A little too excited.)* That's a great idea. We'll shoot 'em with a dart – fwap - and knock 'em out cold. Then we'll tie 'em up and –

MARGE: I'm not entirely comfortable with –

LIBBY: Fine, fine. What about our exit strategy? We're on the second floor. How do we get down?

EDWINA: Maybe we can jump.

GINO: Do we have a few fathoms of some strong rope? If we affix it to the window here we could scale down the exterior.

STELLA: Ooh, how about a parachute? We can make one out of the bed sheets!

GINO: If only they didn't lock the windows...

ALBERT: *(Losing his cool.)* Oh for PETE'S SAKE!

He throws the ball too hard this time, and it bounces off the floor, hits the wall and goes flying off into oblivion. He stands.

GINO: Hey, that's my tennis ball!

ALBERT stands, walks toward the table.

ALBERT: Sorry, Gino. Haven't you guys ever planned a covert op before? We have to assess and exploit the situation. But above all, we have to be realistic. We don't want anyone breaking a hip.

LIBBY: What do you suggest, Einstein?

ALBERT: Let's see what I've got here.

ALBERT hoists his suitcase onto the table on top of the blueprint. He pops it open and rummages through it. We may see a few of the items he mentions – notably the slippers – but there is no need to show them all. The OTHERS ad lib surprise and approval as he rummages.

ALBERT: Hmm, grappling hook, night vision goggles, throwing stars, acetylene torch, smoke bombs, scuba gear, C4 with remote detonator – oh, THERE are my slippers. Been looking everywhere for those. Digital binoculars, fingerprint scanner, GPS...

LIBBY: Albert, this is some suitcase.

GINO: Very impressive.

ALBERT: *(Snapping it shut.)* Useless junk, all of it! *(He places it under the table.)* Let's break it down one obstacle at a time. First, we need to get out of this room. We'll need a key card for that.

LIBBY: I can make a fake ID with a magnetized strip in a jiffy.

ALBERT: You know how to do that?

EDWINA: She's a disgruntled DMV worker.

ALBERT: Oh, that's right.

LIBBY: Former.

EDWINA: Yes, former DMV worker. Not formerly disgruntled.

GINO: No, currently disgruntled. Quite currently.

LIBBY: Put a sock in it, fancypants.

GINO: I rest my case.

ALBERT: Ok, Libby's got our exit covered. Next we need to disable the security camera in the hallway.

STELLA: *(Raises hand.)* I have a question.

ALBERT: Yes, Stella?

STELLA: If you can be “disgruntled,” can you also be “gruntled”? As in, “Ooh, how lovely! I’m so gruntled to be here!”

ALBERT: I don’t know, Stella. Now, I specialized in electronics in the service, so I can take care of the camera. I’ll just need something to work with that’s long and sharp. A pencil, or...

EDWINA: (*Producing knitting needles.*) A set of knitting needles?

ALBERT: (*He takes them.*) Perfect, Edwina, these will do nicely. We’ll execute this op at night, so Ms. Fletcher won’t be around.

MARGE: We have a night guard. Simon.

ALBERT: Okay, we’ll need a diversion – someone who can distract him while I take care of the camera.

STELLA: (*Looks excited, clears throat loudly.*) Ahem!

ALBERT: We need someone so captivating – so utterly compelling, that this fella won’t be aware of anything else that’s happening.

STELLA: (*Even louder, batting her eyes.*) A-HEM!

ALBERT: (*Finally noticing her.*) What’s the matter, Stella, you need a lozenge? (*Pats pockets.*) I think I have a lemon one on me somewhere. You’re blinking at me, too, is there something in your eye?

STELLA: No! It so happens, Colonel, that I used to be a Cleveland Browns cheerleader. Half the boys on the team were sweet on me. He won’t be able to resist my charms. Let me be the diversion!

ALBERT: I’m not sure you’re really Simon’s type –

STELLA: Here, I’ll prove it. Watch this!

She exuberantly performs an elaborate cheerleading dance. In her youth it may have been impressive, but now she moves quite slowly, and although she is trying to hide it behind a phony smile, we can see that every move hurts.

STELLA: Our team is red HOT
Your team ain’t doodly-SQUAT
Go, Browns, Go! Go, Browns, Go!

Our team is red HOT
Your team ain’t doodly-SQUAT
Go, Browns, Go! Go, Browns, Go!

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She ends in a pose with her arms out to her sides, one foot in front of the other. After applause, she starts to slide downward.

STELLA: And now for the SPLIT!

ALL OTHERS: No, no, no, no!

ALBERT and LIBBY each take one of STELLA's arms and pull her back up before she can perform a full split.

STELLA: *(As she is being pulled back up.)* I can do it, I can do it! Aw, what a buncha party poopers.

ALBERT: All right, I suppose that's sufficiently...distracting. You can be the diversion.

STELLA: Hooray! He'll be putty in my hands.

LIBBY: So what happens next?

ALBERT: We take the elevator down to the first floor...

EDWINA: Yes...?

GINO: ...and...?

ALBERT: ...and we shuffle right out the front door.

LIBBY: Are you crazy?

ALBERT: Crazy like a fox! All we need is a getaway car. How about the nursing home van?

LIBBY: We don't have the keys.

GINO: I'll field that one. As a former limousine driver, I have all manner of relevant automotive experience.

LIBBY: *(Blank stare.)* ...meaning?

GINO: *(Interrupting her impatiently.)* Hotwire. I'll hotwire the van.

LIBBY: Ah! I see.

ALBERT: Perfect.

GINO: Plebeians.

MARGE: Are you sure this is going to work, Colonel?

ALBERT: Nope! But that's half the fun, isn't it?

GINO: I suppose that depends considerably on your definition of "fun."

EDWINA: Well, I guess there's just one more question, Colonel Dickinson.

ALBERT: What's that?

EDWINA: When are we putting this fool plan of yours into action?

ALBERT: Hmm. (*Looks at his watch, then at the group. A beat.*)
Twenty two hundred hours tonight work for everyone?

THEY all look at each other - without indicating yes or no - and then...

BLACKOUT.

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SCENE 3

It is nighttime. Dim lights rise on GINO center stage, standing with his walker and wearing an open trench coat over his pajamas. LIBBY and EDWINA enter wearing shawls and holding handbags. They speak in stage whispers.

GINO: Hurry up, girls! We gotta make it to that game.

LIBBY: It's the middle of the night. The game's not 'til tomorrow.

GINO: Albert said we get to camp out in his son's yard tonight.

EDWINA: This plan keeps getting crazier.

GINO: Isn't it wonderful? I do hope I can catch a fly ball at the game.

EDWINA: I want a candy apple.

LIBBY: They'll have to run it through a blender first...

GINO: Has anyone seen Marge? I wonder where she's gone off to.

EDWINA: Why? You sweet on Marjorie, Gino?

GINO: I simply do not wish to leave her behind. This baseball game is her dream, you may recall.

Awkward silence. They don't know what to do next.

LIBBY: Well, this plan's really started off with a bang, hasn't it?

Suddenly, from off stage there is an explosion. Immediately a fire alarm starts going off. Red lights flash. A moment of confusion among the elderly folks, then the GUARD runs in from stage right. He wears a white coat and has a key ring and a walkie-talkie on his belt.

GUARD: What's going on in here?

GINO: *(Covering his ears.)* WHAT?

GUARD: What's going on in here?

GINO: *(Still yelling.)* Can't hear you! Fire alarm's going off!

GUARD: I'll turn it off!

GUARD goes upstage left and reaches up toward the ceiling to shut off an unseen fire alarm. During this, GINO crosses downstage with his walker. He stops, holds his downstage leg straight, and shakes it. A handful of vitamins come out a hole in his pocket and spill out the leg of the pajamas onto the floor. He shuffles out of the way. The fire alarm shuts off and the red light stops flashing. The GUARD heads back downstage, not noticing the vitamins.

GUARD: That should take care of that. I think it's time for you folks to get back into bed –

EDWINA: No, sonny, I think it's time for YOU to take your VITAMINS!

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