

PIECES OF LIFE

TEN MINUTE PLAY

By Mike Willis

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(1 MAN, 2 WOMEN)

NORA (w)A 103 year old woman. A family matriarch whose speech and movements are all done with a certain elegance befitting her age. NORA is a memory and as such with makeup she can be played by a younger woman. She is sharp-witted.

SARAHA woman in her forties or early fifties. SARAH is NORA'S granddaughter. SHE is confident and strong-willed.

DAVIDA man in his forties or early fifties. DAVID is SARAH'S husband. HE is confident, with a tender side.

SCENE

NORA'S home or apartment.

TIME: The year 1990.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

The setting is NORA'S home or apartment, but the play is to be performed on a bare stage with props. There should be two acting areas on the stage. A slightly raised platform area stage right or left for NORA and a stage-level area center-stage used by DAVID and SARAH. If a platform area cannot be achieved on the stage, both areas can be played at stage-level. Separate lighting is not needed for each area, as the play should be performed in full-view of the audience as if two scenes were happening at the same time. It is important that when NORA speaks that SARAH and DAVID continue acting as if they are reading the letter, but do *not* mouth the words. There is no interaction between NORA and the other characters. DAVID and SARAH should move around the rocking chair as if the chair is empty. NORA is a memory and should not act overly elderly or feeble. Two of the boxes need to be strong enough for sitting.

Pieces of Life is dedicated to the memory of Nora Austin Willis, 1887-1981, and contains actual accounts from her life. She was a pioneer and a remarkable woman.

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

SETTING:

We are in NORA'S home, which is represented by a slightly raised platform stage right. An old rocking chair sits in the middle of the platform. The chair is surrounded by cardboard boxes of various sizes. An old quilt built in the checkerboard pattern is draped over the back of the rocking chair. There are no walls.

AT RISE:

NORA enters from SR carrying a small sewing bag. SHE is very old, dressed in a faded housedress and moves stiffly. NORA crosses to the rocking chair, picks up the quilt and sits. Taking a needle and thread from the sewing bag, NORA begins sewing on the quilt. NORA is invisible to SARAH and DAVID. SARAH enters from SR, crosses to the platform, picks up one of the boxes and carries it CS and sits on it. NORA continues sewing on the quilt as DAVID enters from SL and crosses to SARAH.

DAVID: *(Visibly irritated.)* What are you doing over here? I've been looking all over for you. I thought we were going to hire someone to get rid of your grandmother's junk.

SARAH: *(Angry.)* It's not junk!

DAVID: Look . . . okay, it's not junk, I . . . just thought we had decided to hire someone to get rid of it all.

SARAH: No! We didn't decide that. You decided that. *(Continuing quietly.)* I just didn't say anything against it, and I should have. I'm sorry. Look, I don't want to fight . . . not today. I just need to take care of my grandmother's things.

DAVID: Okay, if you don't want to hire someone to do it, I'll stay here and help you.

SARAH: You don't have to stay and help.

SARAH crosses to the platform to get another box. NORA takes an envelope out of her sewing bag and folds it in the quilt and then places the quilt on her lap. DAVID crosses to the platform and reaches to pick up a box.

SARAH: Don't!

DAVID: What?

SARAH: You don't have to help . . . I don't want anyone touching her things.

DAVID: But, I . . .

SARAH: David, I need to do it myself.

SARAH crosses CS with a box and sits with her head in her hands. DAVID follows and sits on another of the boxes.

DAVID: (*Quietly.*) Sarah, I . . .

SARAH: (*Explaining.*) I'm sorry. It's just that . . . my grandmother was a very special person. No matter how bad my day was, she always made me feel good . . . she was wonderful. Her hugs were real hugs, ya know . . . not one of those fleeting hugs with no real feeling. When she hugged me, I knew I was really loved. (*Upset.*) Now she's gone, and I'm never going to feel that again.

DAVID: I'm sorry . . . I didn't know you cared so much for her.

SARAH: Neither did she. I never told her and . . . and now I can't.

DAVID: I'm sure she knew you loved her.

SARAH: What makes you so sure?

DAVID: Your hugs . . . I'm sure she felt your love when the two of you hugged. (*Pause.*) I know I do . . . when you hug me.

SARAH: Oh, David . . .

DAVID hugs SARAH, who sobs quietly.

DAVID: Can I stay if I don't touch anything?

SARAH: (*Smiling slightly.*) You won't touch anything?

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DAVID: Not if you don't want me to.

SARAH: *(Giving in.)*

Great . . . you can sit there and watch the boxes if you want. I've only got a few more things, then I'll be ready to load it all in the truck.

DAVID: You want me to bring the truck up closer to the house so . . .

SARAH: No, you don't have to.

DAVID: You don't want me touching our truck?

SARAH: *(Smiling.)* All right, go get the truck.

DAVID exits SL. SARAH composes herself and crosses to the platform, takes the quilt from NORA'S lap and places it on top of a box and carries it CS. NORA sits quietly in the rocker, HER eyes closed. SARAH sits the box on the floor and then picks up the quilt. The envelope folded up in the quilt falls out on the ground and SARAH picks it up. SARAH sits on a box and opens the envelope and takes out four folded pieces of paper. One of the pieces of paper is a letter, another is a map of the quilt pattern and two are filled with the writings of NORA'S memories. SARAH begins to read the letter.

SARAH: *(Reading.)* My dearest Sarah . . .

NORA begins speaking as SARAH pretends to read the letter.

NORA: If you are reading this letter, it means that God has seen fit to call me home. I have led a long and wonderful life. Please don't cry for me, but promise me you will find joy in your own life. I have nothing to give you except my memories, which I have been sewing into this old checkerboard quilt since I first learned to sew almost one hundred years ago. I wish I had something more to give you. I love you dearly.

SARAH: Grandma, Nora.

NORA rocks slowly as SARAH dabs at her eyes. DAVID enters from SL.

DAVID: Are you crying? Hey, what's the matter?

SARAH says nothing, but hands the letter to DAVID who stands CS and reads it silently to himself.

DAVID: Wow. Have you checked out the quilt and read any of what it says about any of it?

SARAH: Not yet.

DAVID crosses and sits on a box.

DAVID: Let's read a few now. (*DAVID places his arm around SARAH.*) C'mon, it might make you feel better.

SARAH: I don't know.

DAVID: Just a few, what do ya say?

SARAH rises, places the envelope on the box and crosses to the platform.

SARAH: I still have one box and her rocker to bring out.

DAVID: (*Pointing at the envelope.*) Is it okay if I look at the map of the quilt?

SARAH: I guess . . . I'll only be a minute.

SARAH crosses to the platform and stops to look through the final box before returning CS. DAVID picks up the envelope and begins looking at the map of the quilt and the other pages of paper. SARAH crosses CS with the final box. The platform is now empty except for NORA slowly rocking in her chair.

DAVID: (*Looking at the map.*) This is amazing. There must be over a hundred patches and your grandmother has numbered each one and has written down a memory from her life to go with it. She's sewn her whole life into this quilt . . . unbelievable.

SARAH: We can start loading the truck now.

DAVID: No, wait. Just sit down for a minute and listen to some of this.

SARAH: David, I . . .

DAVID: Just for a minute, this really is something else. Grab the quilt and look in the lower right-hand corner. There should be a patch there that is yellow and grey.

SARAH picks up the quilt and finds the yellow and grey patch.

DAVID: Did you find it?

SARAH: I think so.

DAVID: That is patch number one, listen to this. (*Reading.*) Patch number one is my birth . . .

NORA begins speaking as DAVID and SARAH react as though DAVID was really reading the letter. DAVID does not mouth the words.

NORA: The day I was born March 6th 1887, the snow was knee-deep and father walked cross-country five miles to fetch the doctor. The doctor came on horseback. The first day that Mother was able to get out of bed, the weather had changed and the sun was out. Father fixed a harness and later fixed dinner. Mother bragged about what a fine dinner it was. Mother often commented that Father could do just anything.

NORA stops speaking but continues to rock slowly. DAVID continues reading.

DAVID: (*Reading.*) But Mother became ill and her leg started to swell, and when the swelling reached her throat, she died.

SARAH: My God.

DAVID: (*Reading.*) Mother knew she was going to die, so she sent to the main house for Grandpa Samuel. She knew that Father would need help caring for me what with my sisters and brother to care for also, so she asked Grandpa Samuel to take care of me and Grandpa promised her that he would. After Mother died, I was taken to Grandpa and Grandma's house to live.

SARAH: And that's what the yellow and grey patch stands for?

DAVID: There's more. (*Reading.*) These are the events as they were told to me. The yellow part of the patch is made from the yellow blanket that I was wrapped in on the day I was born and signifies the joy of my birth. The grey in the patch represents the sadness of my mother's death and is made from an old housedress that was my mother's.

SARAH: Grandma never told me any of that. It's hard to believe that this was my grandmother's baby blanket and part of this was my great grandmother's dress. This cloth is over one hundred years old. I can't believe it.

SARAH presses the quilt to her cheek.

DAVID: Do you want me to read another one?

SARAH: Maybe later, we should just load this stuff up and . . .

DAVID: A few more won't hurt. It's not going to take long to load up.

SARAH: Well... I suppose that will be okay.

DAVID hands the map to SARAH.

DAVID: Here, find patch number ten.

SARAH checks the map and then finds the matching patch on the quilt.

SARAH: I've found it . . . it's some sort of coarse blue material, very faded.

DAVID: Listen to this. (*Reading*) Getting ready for winter . . .

NORA: (*Rocking slowly.*) . . . we sewed strips of old carpet together until there was enough to cover the living room floor. Then we got lots of clean straw, scattered it all over the floor and stretched the carpet real tight over the straw and tacked it down. After supper, we would all sit on the floor around the big heating stove and Grandpa would tell Civil War stories. I always loved Grandpa's stories.

NORA continues rocking as DAVID continues reading.

DAVID: (*Reading.*) This ragged blue patch is made with a piece of Grandpa Samuel's old Civil War uniform and reminds me of his wonderful stories. (*To SARAH.*) That is unbelievable. That means that piece of cloth is from the 1860s and was in the Civil War . . . amazing.

SARAH: Let me read some of those and you take the map and the quilt.

SARAH and DAVID exchange the quilt and the map and notes.

DAVID: You sure you don't want to load the truck?

SARAH: It can wait.

DAVID: Can it?

SARAH: (*Smiling.*) Don't give me a rough time.

DAVID: Who? Me?

SARAH: Find number twenty-one. (*Reading.*) I remember Grandma made me . . .

NORA: . . . a white outfit and took me to the Fourth of July festivities in the city park. One of our neighbors, Pete Ludwig, had a stand, and he sat me on the counter and fed me ice cream and bananas. I got awful sick. I remember the Runkel twins were there. They were boys, but they had on long white dresses that kept falling down. I got over being sick because I was so interested in those babies. This patch is . . .

NORA rocks as SARAH continues reading.

SARAH: *(Reading.)* . . . made from part of my Fourth of July outfit.

DAVID: *(Pointing to a patch on the quilt.)* Here it is, this white patch right here.

SARAH: That's beautiful.

DAVID: There is a solid black patch right next to the white one. That seems weird.

SARAH: That black patch would be number twenty-two . . .
(Reading.) I remember . . .

SARAH and DAVID pretend to read the letter as NORA speaks.

NORA: . . . once I told a lie. Baby cousin William was at the exploring age, into everything. I couldn't keep the cupboard doors shut for him. I said, "He's into everything." Someone told my aunt what I said, and she was angry at me for saying this. When she asked me if I had said this about William, I said I didn't because I thought she wouldn't ever let me play with him again.

NORA rocks slowly as SARAH continues reading.

SARAH: *(Reading.)* It was winter, and someone took a sled-load of us children into town to a revival meeting at the Methodist Church. I went forward, knelt at the old wooden bench and prayed. Then I knew I had to confess that I had lied. That sure changed my life. I sewed a solid black patch into my quilt to remind me of my lie.

DAVID: One lie in over a hundred years . . . your grandmother was a saint.

SARAH, on the verge of tears, crosses slightly DS with the letter.

SARAH: Yes, she was.

DAVID crosses to SARAH.

DAVID: Are you okay? Sarah?

SARAH: Yes, it's just . . . you know . . .

DAVID: Hard . . . it's hard.

SARAH: Yes, it is.

DAVID puts his arms around SARAH.

DAVID: Is there anything in there about your grandfather Virgil?

DAVID leads SARAH back to the boxes and they sit. SARAH looks through the papers.

SARAH: Here's one, patch number forty-one . . . *(Reading.)*
Grandpa Samuel sold the farm when I was twenty-one and . . .

SARAH and DAVID pretend to read the letter as NORA speaks.

NORA: we moved to town. It was 1907. My cousin Walter moved in with us while he attended business school. One day, Walter came home and said that Virgil Austin, who lived next door, had asked him how old I was. I wondered why he had asked, but I was kind of thrilled too. Virgil was so “tony.”

DAVID: Tony?

SARAH: *(Reading.)* Tony is what kids today call cool. One day at noon, Virgil came to the back door and knocked.

SARAH and DAVID pretend to be reading as NORA speaks.

NORA: I was washing Grandma’s underwear, and I was so embarrassed. He asked me to go to an oratorical contest with him. I went, and it was very interesting. That was our first date.

NORA rocks slowly as SARAH reads.

SARAH: *(Reading.)* I have used a piece of Grandma’s old underwear to remind me of my first date with my Virgil.

DAVID: *(Laughing.)* Your grandmother had quite a sense of humor.

SARAH: She did . . . she could be very funny. Once she told me a story about a friend of hers, Maude . . . and Maude was going with this boy Herman and was leading him on. Anyway, Maude told my grandmother that she was going to give Herman “the bounce,” as she called it. Grandma thought this was very rude and told Maude so. Maude suggested that since my grandmother felt that way maybe she should go out with Herman. My grandmother told Maude . . .

NORA speaks while SARAH and DAVID react to the story.

NORA: “I don’t think so. If he isn’t good enough for you, he certainly isn’t good enough for me.”

DAVID: What a great story.

DAVID and SARAH laugh softly together as NORA rocks slowly.

DAVID: Your grandmother really was someone special.

SARAH: Yes, she was. (*SARAH looks through the pages of the letter.*) Our names are in here.

DAVID: Really?

SARAH rises and crosses CS.

SARAH: (*Reading.*) The blue silk cloth that makes up patch number seventy-five may well be my favorite memory sewn into this old quilt. The cloth was taken from the dress I wore on the wedding day . . .

NORA: . . . of my granddaughter Sarah to her true love, David. My dearest Sarah, as you read this and look at the blue silk patch in the quilt, I hope you will remember what a wonderfully perfect day that was. As you stood there with David reciting your vows, my mind drifted back to my wedding day and my beloved Virgil. You looked so happy, so much in love. I remember thinking, "What a beautiful couple, so . . ."

NORA rocks slowly as SARAH reads.

SARAH: (*Reading.*) ". . . so 'tony.'"

SARAH stops reading and DAVID crosses to her with the quilt. SARAH clutches the letter to her chest, and DAVID places the quilt on her shoulders.

DAVID: We did look "tony," didn't we?

SARAH: Yes, we did.

DAVID: Can I help you load the truck, or are you ready to give me . . . "the bounce?"

SARAH: What are we gonna do with all this, this . . .

DAVID: *Stuff?* I think we should take it all home with us, that way you can take your time looking through it all.

SARAH: Really? What changed your mind?

DAVID: Your grandmother's quilt. She's left you quite a gift.

SARAH: The best gift of all . . . a piece of her life.

*SARAH wraps the quilt around HER and DAVID and they hug CS.
NORA rocks quietly as the lights fade to black.*

THE END

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