

# The FBI and the Bag Lady

by Faye Girsh



An original play in honor of Sharlotte Hydorn, known as The Bag Lady. She made Exit Bags and was visited by the FBI. This is in memory of her courage and dedication to the right to choose to die with dignity.



## CAST

A COUPLE, the Walkers

SHAR, tall, attractive, warm, vivacious 91 year old woman

RAJA (PACO), foreign-looking 57 year old man, slight accent

FBI AGENT(S), tough, armed, uniformed, authoritative

JUDGE, compassionate but deliberate, firm

BAILIFF, business like

LAWYER, on Shar's side but quiet

REPORTERS

## ACT ONE

### Scene I

(A couple, the Walkers, on their deck, in La Jolla.)

HE: Nice evening. Shall we have our drinks outside.

SHE: Good idea. Then you can tell me how your visit went with Howie and Greta.

HE: (Brings wine and glasses. Pours) I'm anxious to talk to you about that. It was depressing to see what's happening to Howie — and how hard it is for Greta. But it made me think that we should start talking about these things.

SHE: What things?

HE: Sickness, dying, losing one's mind. Howie is getting more confused. It's hard for Greta to take him anywhere. They saw a doctor last week who thought he had some form of early dementia and advised more tests. Greta feels she can't leave him alone, and even when he's home he often leaves and wanders off.

SHE: They're such a wonderful, devoted couple — this is a real tragedy for both of them. What will they do?

HE: Greta promised him she wouldn't put him in a nursing home. He says he never wanted to get to a state like this and wanted to know if I knew some way for him to end his life. Greta seemed adjusted to it, like they'd been discussing this before, so she didn't protest. In fact, she said that after being married for 58 years and with her own shortness of breath and constant tiredness that they might think about doing it together.

SHE: Wow! That IS shocking! What did you say?

HE: I spewed out some cliches like, "You'll be OK Howie" and "You two can get some help in here, so not to worry" — but it didn't even sound right to me. You know, honey, it made me think. We're all getting up there. Something bad is bound to happen to one of us, then what do we do?

SHE: Well, we have long term care insurance. And our kids would help us. Or we could move to a retirement place. And we have our living wills.

HE: You're right about all those things. We **have** done some planning. But we know enough friends who have suffered through cancer and dementia — and remember Barbara with ALS? None of them seemed to have a good solution. They all found the end of their lives miserable.

SHE: Right. I remember when Helen died how bad it was and how often, even when she was getting hospice care, that she said she would want to die. When she finally did die but it was after months of suffering.

HE: And how hard it was for Ben and her son to go through this with her. The really sad part was when Ben developed a heart condition and died not too long after. Probably it was because taking care of Helen was such a strain.

SHE: You know, I think I wouldn't want to stick around if I knew I could never do the things I enjoy and that I was being a burden to you or the kids. We've had a good life, we all have to die, and I'd like to know there's a way out. I heard Woody Allen say once, "I'm not afraid of dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens." I used to think that was a joke, but not after hearing about Greta and Howie.

HE: We could get drugs and have them around, just in case.

SHE: What drugs?

HE: I don't know. Sleeping pills like Marilyn Monroe had.

SHE: Where do you get them? I don't think Dr. Rivers would prescribe them. If he did he could put his license in danger. Besides, I heard you can't get the drugs you really need, even with a prescription.

HE: Did you ever hear of the book, Final Exit? It's by a man who helped his wife die.

SHE: I've got the computer open, let me Google it. (Pause, on computer) Here it is, you can get it on Amazon. And there's another web site, ERGO, where you can order it and other books and things. Oh, the author is Derek Humphry and

here's a book about his wife's death — Jean's Way. And here's that book, Final Exit, AND a pamphlet about... the helium method.

HE: What could that be? Is that supposed to have something to do with dying?

SHE: I guess so. And it mentions a couple of organizations, like the Hemlock Society of San Diego — wow, that's convenient — and the Final Exit Network.

HE: Why don't you try Googling them? I'll get my iPhone out and see what I can find. (He looks at his iPhone.)

SHE: It says that the Hemlock Society here has these resources at their meetings. It has Advance Directive packets, and it has that book, Final Exit, and there's a Final Exit DVD, and there's another book on dying by not eating and drinking.

HE: That's not for me! I like to eat too much. But "never say never" they say. There's a notice about their next meeting. Maybe we should go and find out things.

HE: Not a bad idea — though I don't think we're really ready yet. And it's sort of morbid to go to a meeting about dying.

SHE: Look, they have announcements about Death Cafes and other meetings around town on end-of-life issues. It says they've been around 20 years and here's a list of their meetings. Umm.. not all about ending your life. Some on home care, hospice, what doctors think, a movie, lots of things. (Pause, he looks some more.)

HE: Now I found the Final Exit Network web page. It says they will talk to people about possibilities for ending your life right in your home. That's a really good service. And it's all staffed by volunteers — maybe like us.

SHE: Let's go in and order some of these things.

HE: I'm up for it. Time to do some serious planning.

(Get up and take their drinks in.)

## **SCENE 2**

(Two weeks later. The Walkers back on stage, seated, talking to each other. An imaginary TV is in front of them.)

HE: Well, we got that book AND the pamphlet AND the DVD. Shall we take a look at the DVD? (They turn on the TV and watch the Final Exit video) Oh, that's Derek Humphry. And he is talking about his wife's death. Look, the method he's suggesting involves inhaling helium with a bag on your head. He says it is peaceful and quick.

SHE: Look, there he is demonstrating the bag. That doesn't look too bad. It's a transparent, big bag with something like elastic around the neck and some tubes that hook to the helium tank. He says the helium displaces the oxygen in your brain. That you lose consciousness in a few seconds and die in less than 20 minutes.

SHE: Sounds terrible — but amazing. But it doesn't look too bad to see him do it. Of course, he's just demonstrating. Not the real thing!

(They stop watching TV, switch it off and continue talking)

HE: I wonder where you would get the bags and tubes and everything.

SHE: There's an address in that little pamphlet we bought. (She looks through the pamphlet.) Oh look, it's right here in El Cajon. You can send cash or a money order to this post office box, But it says you have to get the helium separately — but, hey, you can get it at Walmart! That's not too hard.

HE: To be on the safe side, do you want to send for a bag?

SHE: One for both of us? It'll be crowded under there.

HE: (Laughs) We can take turns. Or recycle. Let's just see what it's like.

SHE: Remember that the kids are coming over tomorrow night. Not a word to them about this.

HE: Why not? They know about our Advance Directive. That they are not to keep us on machines if we have no quality of life. Maybe they should also know that, if

we're **not** hooked up to machines and our quality of life is getting bad, that we'd consider having a peaceful way to go.

SHE: You know they'd try to talk us out of it.

HE: Sure, that's what they're supposed to do. But I think they'd do that only if they didn't understand how we felt about things. I know Ralph is more religious than we are and might try to convince us that only God can take a life. But I think we can explain our point of view. And I think Florence, who after all **is** our daughter, can talk to him too. Maybe his God believes in free will — and compassion.

SHE: I am still not convinced that a bag over my head is the best way to go.

HE: Me either but the book talks about why violent methods, like guns and jumping off buildings, and poisons are not the way people should die. It is horrible to think what harm you could do to yourself, how you could even botch it, and how terrible it would be to discover such a death. And he points out that people should die with dignity and be able to choose methods that are peaceful, quick and certain.

SHE: I never thought of it that way. And I guess those drugs that would do the job are not around — except in Oregon and even here in California now. A doctor can write a prescription for someone who has six months to live. Now we don't have to retire to Oregon where they've had a Death with Dignity law since 1997! What an advanced state that must be!

HE: Yep, it's a nice place, if you like rain. But I read that there's a similar law in Washington state — and, recently the legislature in Vermont passed a law. And I read that the Vermont Governor actually campaigned to pass a law like that. Can you imagine? So we have a choice.

SHE: In those places you have to have lived there for a while. You can't just show up. And you have to have only six months to live — which might be too limiting, like if we had dementia.

SHE: I heard you can get help in Switzerland. But it's really expensive — maybe \$8000 to \$10,000!

HE: It's something to think about — but I'd rather be home. Especially if I'm pretty sick or really out of it. I did see a TV documentary about an American man dying at some place there — I think it was called Dignitas.

SHE: I remember that. Well, we can get back on the computer and see what else is available. And we can try one of those Hemlock meetings. Another thing — let's send a money order tomorrow and get an exit bag. I'm anxious to see what it's like.

HE: You know, it was a good thing I went to see Howard the other day. It takes a lot to realize that we could die some day. It's forced us to consider what choicess we have,

SHE: (laughs) "Could die?" I don't think it's an option. Yes, you're right. It's a hard subject to think about — but this conversation is a good start. Look, we can be the first on our block to know everything about how to die.

HE: Maybe the bag will come before Ralph and Florence come over and we can show them.

HE: That would make terrific dinner conversation! (both laugh) (They exit the stage.)

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## **ACT TWO**

### **Scene 1**

( December 21, 2010, around noon, Shar's modest living room in El Cajon, CA, a working-class suburb of San Diego. A Christmas decoration is up. Shar seated at a sewing machine. Paco enters.)

SHAR: Hi dear. Anything interesting at the Post Office today?

PACO: (Carrying about 15 envelopes and a bag with tubing.) Mom, we got a pretty large bundle of letters. One stamp look like it's from Germany... and here's one from Australia, one from Japan....I'll just put them on the table and we can sort them out later.



SHAR: We're so behind in our orders now. We'll have to try to catch up if we're ever going to get all these boxes out. Were you able to pick up more tubing?

PACO: Yeh, I got about four yards of it at Home Depot. And I picked up a couple dozen T clips. Couldn't remember if we were running out.

SHAR: Thanks dear. Want some lunch?

PACO: Sounds good, Mom. Why don't I open these and get them sorted out and record the addresses first — before they get lost. (Starts to open envelopes. Carelessly puts cash and money orders in an envelope and makes a tidy pile of addresses and notes.)

Oh, mom, I heard something on the radio just I was coming in. I didn't get it all but something about a 29 year old man, I think he was in Oregon. They found his body and he had a bag over his head and a helium tank. It was sort of sad. They said he wasn't sick and he was alone.

SHAR: So young. I wonder what his problem was and why nobody was with him.

PACO: Yes, I wondered too. But where would he have gotten the bag? I did say it was Oregon. Of course they do have a Death with Dignity Law there.

SHAR: If he had a terminal illness he would have been able to get a prescription for drugs in Oregon — and he wouldn't have had to be alone. And, of course, Derek lives there so many people are familiar with Final Exit (holds up the book) and would know how to contact us and to how to use the bag. You didn't catch his name did you? We could see if he's on our list. (Takes out her lap top, opens it, clicks a few times. Looks at screen, scrolls.)

PACO: Do you see his name?

SHAR: I don't see any orders from Oregon for the last month. I guess it could have been earlier. Or he could have made his own bag. That's pretty easy. Or maybe he'd had it for awhile. Maybe he got it from from Evelyn in Canada.

PACO: Or from Rod in Montana. That would have meant he's been thinking about this for a long time. We've been making these for — what is it now? about

five years? Then before that Rod made those nice ones that he sent out with orchid growing instructions.

SHAR: Yes (laugh). (Now sad) He stopped when he got a brain tumor and couldn't do it any more. How sad that was. ...I remember now: we started GLADD in January 2007 so it'll be four years next month.

PACO: Do you know how Rod is? We did hear from Joan a few months ago and didn't she say he uses a wheel chair now and is having trouble speaking — but he is OK?

SHAR: That's right. They seemed glad to know we were taking over. He felt strongly that it was a service to people to have a well-made bag, with the tubing, available in case they needed it. He sent some of the letters he got and these people were so grateful. That's one reason I decided to continue what he was doing and it's turned out that so many people appreciate it.

PACO: The first really brave person was Evelyn, and her friend Brenda, in Canada. She made very nice bags, though I think we've been able to improve on them because of the feedback all of us have gotten from people.

SHAR: I think Evelyn made them for about five years then she was caught in that sting operation. That was terrible when this young woman — who seemed so concerned about how her aunt died— turned out to a Mouny and Evelyn was arrested. It took about three years before she was finally tried for assisting the suicide of this woman's so-called "aunt."

PACO: But the jury acquitted her, didn't they?

SHAR: They sure did and it was a great celebration among Canadian right to die supporters. Even though she had good attorneys, who were sympathetic, the legal fees were high. Fortunately supporters from all over the world raised money for her.

PACO: But neither Evelyn nor Rob were ever arrested for making these bags, were they?

SHAR: No. And of course it's not illegal to do what we're doing or to distribute these bags (holds one up.)

PACO: No, it's really a public service. They should be easily available. If they're not going to let us have the drugs that would end our lives peacefully, people who need to use this method should at least be able to buy these bags easily and safely.

SHAR: People who are sick and alone, and sometimes scared, should not have to figure out how to make these, on top of everything else they're having to work out.

PACO: Oh, mom. I just remembered what else they said on the radio. Something about changing the law in Oregon to ban the sale of these kits.

SHAR: Really?? How can they stop people from buying some plastic? We'll have to figure out what to do if that passes.

PACO: Right, we will — though we don't have that many orders from Oregon, or wherever that was. (Picks up envelope stuffed with money and money orders. Takes the computer.) Ok, mom, I'll put these checks in the envelope. We can take the money out if we need it — and I'll record the addresses on the computer.

SHAR: OK, good work. What would you like for lunch?

(They get up, exit)

### **ACT 3**

#### **SCENE 1**

(Five months later, in Shar's living room)

PACO: (coming in) Mom, we've never had so many orders (loaded with mail). I don't know how we can handle them.

SHAR: You know it's probably happened since Oregon passed that silly law making it a crime to sell these kits there. That helped inform a lot of people about what we do. And they were happy to find out about us.

PACO: Looks like we'd better get to work. Even if we can't sell them in Oregon people all over the world seem to want a GLADD Bag.

SHAR: I guess if they had to go to so much trouble to make it a crime in Oregon to sell these that it must be OK to sell them everywhere else.

PACO: That sounds right. Would you pass the scissors, mom?

(They exit, to take positions as though they were sleeping in their respective bedrooms. Take robes with them.)

## SCENE 2

(Seven months later, May 25, 2011. 7:30 AM, still dark, in Sharlotte's modest home. Both are in their own rooms asleep. Suddenly there is loud, insistent knocking at the door, men screaming.)

FBI: Let me in. FBI. You have 30 seconds to open this door. (Other voices can be heard and continued loud knocking.)

SHAR: (grabs her robe, slippers and removes curlers. Paco comes from the other room). Paco, get the door! What can that be? (Alarmed)

FBI MAN: Open now or we will break this door down. Open immediately. FBI! Mrs. Hydorn, we know you're in there!

PACO: (Goes to door, Shar behind him but she screams at door) Hold your horses, I'm coming! (To Paco) Let me get it. (She opens the door).

MAN: (Pushes door in, holds gun within four inches of her face) OK men, come in. (Gives the illusion that there are six armed, uniformed FBI agents behind him who all enter). You Sharlotte Hydorn?

SHAR: Yes, I am. What are you doing here?

MAN: I have a warrant to search your house. (Waves paper around — and gun) Do **not** touch anything, put your hands up. You too mister. Who are you?

PACO: I am Paco Hydorn, Mrs. Hydorn's adopted son.

FBI: Are you legal? Let me see your papers!

PACO: My papers? I just woke up. I'm her son, I'm a citizen!

FBI: I have men from Immigration here too. They want to know if you're legal and they want to know about your shipping these kits all over the world.

PACO: Just a minute, I'll find my adoption papers. I'm an American citizen.

ANOTHER AGENT: Yeh, yeh. But I wanna see the proof. And no funny stuff, I'm following you. (Walks behind Paco with his gun pointed. They go to another room.)

SHAR: Why are you here? Let me read that. (Takes warrant) "Dangerous materials..." What do you want here?

MAN: What do you know about the death of Nick Klonoski?

SHAR: I think he was a depressed young man, probably gay, who died, I think In Oregon.

MAN: Yes. He died seven months ago. In Oregon. 29 years old. He had one of your GLADD bags on his head, hooked up to some tanks. We traced that bag to you and we came to search your house for the evidence.

SHAR: Yes, I make GLADD bags. What of it? It is not illegal to make them and distribute them.

(Agent comes back and starts looking through everything. Paco stays offstage.)

MAN: That bag caused young Klonoski's death. His mother is a federal judge in Oregon and wants to see to it that these bags will never be distributed to another person to end anyone's life. (Shouting to his men) Check upstairs Joe. Mike go in the cellar. The rest of you fan out. Open all drawers and closets. Put everything that looks suspicious on this table. (He continues waving gun at Shar.) (Agent leaves the room, on a search.

SHAR: What did you do with Paco? Where is he?

AGENT: I left him in his room searching through his papers. I frisked him good, boss. He was clean. Won't cause any trouble.

SHAR: Leave my son out of this. He is legally adopted and an American citizen.

FBI: Don't worry Lady, we won't bother the guy if he can produce his papers.

SHAR: I don't see you asking for MY papers.

FBI: Don't get smart lady.

SHAR: Officer, I am sorry this man died, he must have been desperately unhappy to take his life. But he did not die a violent, bloody death like he might have done by shooting himself or jumping in front of a train. Besides he couldn't die with the bag; it takes more than that.

MAN: These bags should be outlawed. We will make sure there is nothing left of your operation by the time we leave today.

SHAR: You have no right to do this! Do you understand what we are trying to do here? So many people suffer terribly at the end of their lives. We don't want them to die violently or using uncertain and undignified methods. I want to help them die peacefully. This method is quick and certain. It is horrible to try ways that end up leaving the person disfigured or brain damaged.

MAN: (Accusingly) And who do you send these to? Troubled, depressed people who should be seeing a shrink, not trying to end their lives. Do you even know these people who order these things?

SHAR: From the letters that come here I understand that most of these bags go to people in good health who want to plan ahead. They know that if things get too bad and there are no acceptable ways to relieve their suffering that they can use a bag and helium and have a good death. Probably most of them never use the bag but it gives them peace of mind to know they have one.

MAN: (Sarcastic) You actually charge money for these, don't you?

SHAR: Yes, and people are glad to have them. I use very high quality, transparent, heavy plastic so you can see out of it and so it won't leak. Then I put soft velcro at the neck so it stretches over the head and makes a snug but comfortable fit around the neck so no gas can escape. (She walks to the dining room table where plastic sheet, tubing and T connectors are piled up along with boxes.)

MAN: What do they pay you?

SHAR: The bag, with everything, costs \$60. And they have the tubing which is the right diameter to fit on the helium tank and then goes into the bag. (holds up tubing)

MAN: What's this? (holds up connector)

SHAR: It's a T-connector so each piece of tubing is connected then each one goes to one of the tanks.

MAN: You have quite an operation here. How long have you been doing this?

SHAR: About four years. I took it over from a man in Montana who became ill. He made very comfortable bags which he labeled as orchid growing hoods so they looked harmless. Before that a couple of women in Canada made the first ones and those were excellent quality and worked well, though we made some improvements over both of them.

MAN: You must be a looney to get into a business like this (holds up some plastic scornfully.) You seem like a nice old lady. How old are you anyway?

SHAR: I'm 91, in excellent health, and am lucky to be able to care for myself and my son — and also to help others die a good death.

MAN: How did you get into this business of helping people kill themselves?

SHAR: I was married for 30 happy years. When he was only 56 my strong, capable husband, Rex, developed cancer. He was not ready to die, he loved life. He was a Special Education teacher; the kids adored him. We both taught at the same school. They told us he had colon cancer. We tried everything there was then. He had half his colon cut out — and then, even before he had recovered, they started the chemotherapy. In six months he'd lost 40 pounds. He was too weak to walk without help, he couldn't eat and he was in pain all the time. He wanted desperately to leave the hospital and die at home. We had hospice and, finally they wanted to set up a bed right here (points to the window area) but he couldn't leave the hospital. Hospice helped a little with his pain. Most of the day he slept but when he woke he was miserable.

MAN: I'm sorry, ma'am.... So, did you put a bag on his head and kill him?

SHAR: I thought about it. He wanted it but we were both scared that something would happen to me if I helped him end his suffering. It was a nightmare to watch him waste away, lose his dignity, and I couldn't do anything to help him. In those days we didn't know about the helium method and had no idea how to get the right medication. And that's still a mystery.

MAN: So, how did that lead to this? (points to dining table with materials on it)

SHAR: Several years after he died — and it was a death you wouldn't wish on a dog— I heard about the Hemlock Society and became a trained volunteer in their Caring Friends program. It was in 1999; we had a training— in Old Town here — and were taught about this method involving a plastic bag and gas. We told patients who were seriously considering hastening their death about the place in Canada where they could buy the bags.

MAN: Then did you put it on their heads and help them get the helium?

SHAR: No never. We never were allowed to physically assist someone. And we were never permitted to supply the means. It is not “assisted dying.” The program — now it's call the Final Exit Network — only provides information and support. Exit Guides are there with people when they die but the patient must be able to do it themselves. And having one of these kits is very helpful since the people are very sick, often not able to leave the house, sometimes alone, and could be confused if they had to assemble the material themselves.

MAN: (shouts) OK guys, Here's her computer. Look through it and see what you can find. We'll take it with us. And check out the sewing machine. Did you find anything else?

AGENT: We found about 100 boxes in the closet and a scale and a postal meter. She's got quite an operation here....

There are money orders all over the place, some letters aren't even opened. Amazing. They come from all over the world. I even found some from Australia, France and even Japan. Are all these people nuts?

SHAR: They aren't “nuts” officer. These people know what a bad death looks like. It often gets to the point where you have no control over what happens to you. And they don't want to lose their ability to choose how they want to go. By the



way, officer, I think you can put that gun away now. Your men have not found any weapons here.

MAN: (Had been carrying the gun in one hand, puts it back in his hip holster.) OK ma'am. You may be a little wacko but you're probably not going anywhere.

SHAR: Officer, before you decide I'm "wacko", have you ever seen anyone die a horrible death?

MAN: I'm the one asking the questions around here lady.... Anyway, my grandma died last year but she was in a hospital in Arizona and they just told us she died. I guess she just passed in her sleep.

SHAR: Maybe, but not likely. Chances are she died with tubes coming out of everywhere and everyone wanting more and more treatment for her, even though she was sick, tired, in pain and probably ready to go. We really don't see people dying any more; it's not always pretty. There is a lot of suffering and indignity that goes on. Many people are ready to die and they'd like to know it will be peaceful and painless.

MAN: (Picks up box and reads it) What is it with this GLADD bag thing?

SHAR: GLADD stands for Glorious Life And Dignified Death. That's what we stand for. Our right to die movement believes that people should live life to the fullest, as long as it's possible, then, if there is no more treatment and only suffering, they should be able to choose the time and manner of their death, preferably with compassionate assistance. There is a lot done by society to make sure our **lives** are fulfilling — but not enough to reassure people that they can celebrate their lives and control their death at the end.

MAN: Yeah, help them commit suicide.

SHAR: No. Suicide is usually an impulsive act, done by a person alone, using violent means. "A permanent solution to a temporary problem." Something that can be treated. We are talking about people with severe chronic or terminal conditions who have given this a lot of thought and reflection. In the Final Exit Network they have a chance to discuss their situation and their alternatives with someone who knows about hospice, pain relief, and other possibilities. They have as much time as they want to to think about it.

MAN: Yeh, yeh. I'm a Christian and that stuff is wrong. You're playing God. You could be charged with murder!

SHAR: I don't think I murdered anyone or committed any crime. A caring and merciful god would agree with what we're doing here. I will contact an attorney and challenge what your men are doing in my house.

(SHAR leaves while the MEN continues to open drawers and collect things in a large police bag. Five hours pass.)

### **SCENE 3**

FIVE HOURS LATER, 12:30 PM

MAN (after five hours of looting the house): OK men, grab everything and we're outta here. Sure, take the computer — it's got lists of people she sent these things to — and the sewing machine. Mike, make sure you got all the checks and that pile of outgoing orders stacked there. I got the plastic and the tubing and the other stuff. Let's go.

SHAR: Good bye gentlemen. I will call the newspapers and TV stations. They should be here this afternoon. They will be very interested in what you've done here today.

MAN: I'll see you in court, lady. I hope they throw the book at you!

(They leave. Door slams. Shar collapses on the couch, looking around with anger and sadness.)

### **SCENE 4**

(SHAR and PACO sink on the couch. Shar is crying.)

PACO: You handled that so beautifully, mom. You never let them get to you even though they were so rude. They absolutely tore the house up — what a mess!

SHAR (in tears and shaking:): Paco, I can't believe, in this country, people with guns could barge in here, insult us, tear the house up, destroy things, and go out with my belongings. They never stopped to hear my story.

PACO: You're shaking, mom. (he takes her hand,) Are you OK?

SHAR: I'm **not**, Paco. I didn't want them to see how shocked and angry I was. Look! They took away everything! How dare they? And never really said why. (Quiet pause, Shar is crying) Paco,... I don't think I ever told you this. When I was 13 I ran away from my mother. She was horrible to me, she'd hit me with tree branches almost every day and call me terrible names. Finally she made me leave. I put a few of my things in a bag, stole some money from her purse, and left at night. There I was, all by myself, at the bus station, not knowing what to do but sure that I had to get away. Right now I'm feeling the same anger and despair that I felt then — almost 75 years ago!

PACO: I can imagine what that was like when you were young. It's about 25 years ago that I left my home in Mexico. I was so scared and feeling like there was no hope and nobody cared. It wasn't till you found me and offered to take me back with you that I felt I wan't alone any more. Try not to worry, mom, we have each other, we'll be OK. We'll find another way to help people.

SHAR: Paco, you're so good. Thanks for reassuring me that we'll survive this... (She looks up, wipes her eyes, smiles) You know what? It's time we let people know what happened here today. Why don't we call the radio, TV and paper and tell them we're having a press conference? What do you think?

PACO: Brilliant mom. We'll let people know what their government is doing to innocent people. Let them come inside and see what they did to this house.

SHAR: I am not ashamed of what we do. Let the people decide. (Shar wipes her eyes, blows her nose, and gets a phone book, a phone, and dials a number.) Hello, Channel 10, I have something to report.....

## **SCENE 5**

(3PM Shar and Paco in their back yard. She is wearing a wide brimmed hat, has make up on and a pretty dress. The yard has about 12 reporters all clamoring to ask her questions.)

SHAR: Welcome men and women of the press. I called you — and you probably heard about this from the authorities— to inform the public that the FBI — and a number of other federal agencies, staged a raid on me and my son, Paco (points

to Paco) early this morning. I wanted you to know what happened so that the people can understand what happens to their tax money.

REPORTER: What's this all about? Are you some kind of criminal?

SHAR: I make Exit Bags which are purchased by people all over the world who have seen horrible deaths and want to prevent that from happening to themselves. So they buy a bag and, if things get bad, they inhale helium while the bag is over their heads. This method is quick, painless, and lends itself to having loved ones present while it is happening.

REPORTER: Isn't it better to use drugs?

SHAR: Drugs have many advantages, although you do have to be able to swallow. The problem is: they are not available, even if you have a prescription. They are in the three states where the Death with Dignity Act is now law but a person has have a terminal illness — or six months to live.

REPORTER: Are these bags legal?

SHAR: Yes. It is a fairly easy method to use and it's not hard to make the bags. Mine are ready to go, made with strong plastic, come with the right size tubing, and a special T-clip that allows two tubes to attach to the two tanks.

REPORTER: Did they charge you with a crime?

SHAR: No. I was not charged nor was I, obviously, arrested. It is not a crime to make or sell these bags. Two other people made these bags before I did and were never charged or bothered by law enforcement.

REPORTER: You said it was not only the FBI but other agencies?

SHAR: They identified themselves, after a while, as being from ICE — Immigration and Customs Enforcement — the IRS, the Postal Inspection Service, and the San Diego police — besides the FBI! They started looking into this when a man in Oregon took his life with a GLADD bag on his head. If he had shot or hung himself or jumped out a window there would have been sadness and shock —but no outcry about the method he chose to use. But because he inhaled helium and had one of my bags, the focus shifted to this method and trying to make this choice more difficult, if not impossible.

REPORTER: Sounds like getting a gun and taking care of it that way is the simplest way.

SHAR: We in the right to die movement do not believe that people should die violently or alone. We strongly object to resorting to a gun and are recommending ways where people can die with dignity.

But now, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to show you what our tax dollars have done to my home. Besides intimidating us by pointing guns in our face at 7:30 in the morning, they have confiscated my computer, my sewing machine, all records of people who have ordered bags, money from these orders, and materials which have been expensive to purchase. And they humiliated my son by asking for his papers. They were rude and demeaning....I thought, "This is what it must feel like to be raped." But at no time did they accuse me of breaking a law. (She leads them into the house.)

INTERMISSION

### **ACT 3**

SCENE 1:

(One year later. The federal court house in San Diego. Bailiff, judge, lawyer and Shar present. The couple we first met, the Walkers, are in the audience.)

(THE WALKERS SITTING IN THE BENCHES)

SHE: Do you think they will throw the book at her?

HE: What if she has to go to jail?

SHE: Or if she has to pay thousands of dollars?

HE: This is crazy. She's an old lady trying to help people.

SHE: Shh, we're starting.

BAILIFF: All rise for Judge Bernadette Skomal. (Audience rises then sits (Pause) You may be seated. This is the case of the United States vs Ms. Sharlotte Hydorn.

JUDGE: Mr. Goldberg, what do you have to say for your client?

LAWYER: Your honor, Ms. Hydorn agrees that she was negligent in filing her 2010 income tax form and has agreed to pay the fee plus a fine of \$1000 and serve a year of probation. In light of her age, her years of distinguished teaching, and that she no prior run-ins with the criminal justice system we recommend the minimum probation requirements.

JUDGE: Those terms are acceptable to the court. I want to also make it clear that Ms. Hydorn is not to manufacture, sell or distribute any devices that are designed to be used by another person to commit suicide. Further, she is prohibited from having such a device in any property she owns. Do you agree with this Ms. Hydorn?

SHAR: I do your honor.

JUDGE: (Bangs gavel) Court adjourned.

(10 minutes later. Shar stands outside of courthouse with a big red hat surrounded by reporters.)

SHAR: Ladies and gentlemen, I pled guilty to a "crime" that thousands of people do every year. I was late paying my tax last year. But that's not what this is really about. They call me The Bag Lady because, for the last five years, I constructed comfortable, safe, exit bags so that people could use them, with other equipment, to end their lives with some dignity. It was reassuring to people around the world to have these in their closets if their suffering became too great. These are people who do not want to use violent methods to end their lives so they bought my GLADD bag.

REPORTER: What does GLADD stand for?

SHAR: GLADD stands for Glorious Life and Dignified Death. Can that be wrong? Because this is not a crime they are getting me on a minor tax violation. Meanwhile they put me out of business and scared me with their guns in my face. Friends, this is your FBI, your government at work. Rather than look for the

illegal guns that are killing people or the real tax violators that cheap the government out of millions, they come after me.

REPORTER: What made you interested in doing this?

SHAR: I saw my husband suffer at the end of his life when he would rather have been dead. We do not let our dogs and cats die like this. They are allowed to die in the arms of the people they love with a painless shot that puts them to sleep. How do we permit people to die in pain and indignity and to waste away to helpless dependency? How do we permit our government to squander our resources on prosecuting people like me, when the real crime is that we force people to stay alive, to suffer, to lose their dignity and their personhood, when they would rather die in peace.

REPORTER: Will you appeal Mrs. Hydorn?

SHAR: Friends, I am 92. I'm tired. This year has taken a lot out of me. They put guns to my head, tore up my house, intimidated people I had sent bags to, accused me of being a murderer. I've had to pay a lawyer, though the Final Exit Network helped, and now this fine and probation. People write me from all over the world and continue to send money. I have to send it back and apologize for not being able to provide the comfort and reassurance they were looking for. What happened here is wrong. But, no, I will have to leave it to others to carry on the fight. Thank you. (Steps away.)

### **Scene 3:**

(The day after Shar's hearing. Scene is Shar's house. She is sitting in her living room, dejected, listening to the radio):

RADIO ANNOUNCER: San Diegans were shocked this morning when they heard of the suicide death of one of their favorite football players, Junior Seau. Apparently he died of a self-inflicted gun shot to the heart. It is noted that this is an unusual way to commit suicide since the wound is usually to the head. Another NFL player also recently died by shooting himself in the chest. Though not made public, it is rumored there was a suicide note which authorities believe indicated Junior Seau's wish to have his brain autopsied to detect the presence of brain injury from years of playing football. Friends noted changes in Seau's behavior in recent years. His family stated that they link possible brain impairment to his football career and, now, to his untimely death.

SHAR (turns radio off, to PACO): I found out last year about that young man in Oregon who used my bag to end his life. His brother wrote an article saying he was gay and in the army and that his life had gotten troubled and complicated under Don't Ask Don't Tell. When he finally confessed that he was gay to his commanding officer he was discharged in a week. Since then he had been depressed.

PACO: You mean that his brother blames Klonoski's suicide on the society that made him hide who he was or lose his military career, not on your bag? Too bad, isn't it, that Nick's death didn't lead to an investigation about the causes of his depression and desperation. They should have focused on **why** he died, not how.

SHAR: Junior Seau's death is tragic too but it is leading to an investigation of the NFL and head injuries. Doctors are now working on better helmets. I bet that some of the players in the NFL will sue because they got brain injured playing for their teams. There's where a tragic suicide leads to something good. Nick's death could have done the same if they had looked at why he was so unhappy and what could have been done about it.

PACO: I wonder if his parents were trying to avoid blaming themselves for not helping Nick accept or change his situation. Maybe it was easier to blame the method rather than look at the reason.

#### **SCENE 4**

(In a suburban neighborhood, in the afternoon. A police officer is knocking on the door of Mrs. Walker)

MRS. WALKER: Yes, officer, what's the matter?

POLICE: Mrs. Walker? You received in the mail a notice that you are a victim of a crime and, as such, entitled to receive Victim's Compensation.

WOMAN: That's right, I did, a couple of months ago. I thought that was pretty funny since the "crime" was buying a nice exit bag from a woman in El Cajon.



POLICE: We are interested in protecting you. I am calling today to see how you are since you purchased the plastic bag a while back. Are you feeling suicidal, depressed? Are you considering harming yourself?

WOMAN: (Laughs) That is a joke! I am so grateful that I was able to buy this bag. If anything I am not depressed simply because I have the reassurance that I can use it if I get a bad illness and would rather end my life than go on. This is the only way to do it, short of getting a gun and leaving a mess for my family.

POLICE: Ok, thanks then Ms. Walker. I am glad you're alright.

WOMAN: I can't believe my taxes are going to this foolishness. It was no crime to buy these bags and you have no right to make these inquiries. Thanks for your concern. Goodbye. (Shuts the door in his face.)

POLICE: (to himself) Hmmm, that's what they all say. What an independent, arrogant lot. ...Now that I think about it maybe I should get one of these myself. You never know. But, I heard that that crazy lady who made them was put out of business. Hmm. Guess it's just as well. Got my trusty revolver (fingers his gun.)

## SCENE 5

(Back at the Walkers' home. They are having their wine.)

SHE: You will not believe what happened to me today.

HE: I give up.

SHE: I had a visit from a San Diego cop!

HE: What? Why?

SHE: Do you remember when we got that letter from the government saying we were "victims" and entitled to compensation — all because we had bought one of those Exit Bags.

HE: I do. That was another example of government waste and stupidity if there ever was one!

SHE: So, if that wasn't enough the cop came over for a "wellness check,"

HE: Did he examine you?

SHE: Not quite. He asked if I was suicidal or depressed since I had bought one of Sharlotte's bags.

HE: (Laughs) No kidding! So, did you tell him you were about to kill yourself?

SHE: (laughs) I was really indignant that he had the nerve to come to the house and ask those questions. But I told him I was glad to have a bag like that, just in case things got bad. You know, I think he'd heard a lot of that and I wouldn't be surprised if he would have bought one too — if Shar was still in business. I sure hope she and her son are OK after the ordeal they went through.

HE: We were lucky to get ours when we did. Did I tell you that Florence told me they sent for one too? But the business was closed down and their money order was returned — but they got a wellness check too. I guess Ralph reconsidered and decided it would be OK with God if he decided to get out of this life peacefully.

SHE: Let's drink to Sharotte and her Exit Bags. (They toast)

CURTAIN

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Sharlotte Hydorn died in December, 2013, at age 94 of cancer. Her adopted son, Raja, also died of cancer a year before leaving her by herself. Though alone she had the respect and admiration of thousands of people who have the security of knowing there is a GLADD bag in their closets.