

**JUST AN OLD WOMAN
IN A ROCKING CHAIR**

by
Jan Probst

JUST AN OLD WOMAN IN A ROCKING CHAIR

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JUST AN OLD WOMAN IN A ROCKING CHAIR

Dedicated to my mother, Mary Probst

JUST AN OLD WOMAN IN A ROCKING CHAIR

CHARACTERS

EDNA - Housewife, mother, widow, librarian.

She appears at ages 96, 85, 62, 53, 30 and 19.

MARGARET - High school English teacher, Edna's lifelong best friend.

She appears at ages 85, 62, 53, 30 and 19.

CASTING NOTES

The roles are written for two mature women, age 60+. Costume adjustments can be made to suggest age and time period. As the characters become younger from scene to scene, this can also represent the youthful self that perpetually lives within us all.

TIME

The play takes place over the course of seventy-seven years of Edna's life. Each scene moves to a previous time, except for the final scene.

PLACE

A small town in the middle of farmland, somewhere near Chicago.

Scenes 1, 2 and 7: Edna's apartment in an assisted living facility

Scenes 3, 4 and 5: Kitchen of Edna's house

Scene 6: Same kitchen, earlier, when it was her mother's house

Edna's apartment in assisted living:

Combined kitchenette and living room, with a midwestern touch.

Edna's kitchen/Edna's mother's kitchen:

Create the feel of a large, country kitchen.

The one piece of furniture that remains throughout is the rocking chair.

PROPS

Scene 1 uses a plastic Chicago Cubs 2016 World Series cup.

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Scene 2 uses a different plastic Cubs cup (2008 season or earlier).

Other props are noted throughout the script.

Add or remove props as needed, to indicate backward movement in time.

DIALOG NOTES

... indicates a hesitation or an unfinished thought.

/ indicates interruption and then /dialog by the following speaker.

- within dialog- indicates the speaker interrupting themselves

- at the end of a section of dialog- indicates Edna or Margaret finishing the other's sentence, a familiar and comfortable practice.

MUSIC

Tunes reminiscent of the big band or swing era, as noted and available per copyright.

CITATION

Edna's answering machine message:

A Midsummer Night's Dream, William Shakespeare. Act V, Scene 1

JUST AN OLD WOMAN IN A ROCKING CHAIR

Just An Old Woman in a Rocking Chair received a developmental reading as part of the PlayLab at the Valdez Theatre Conference, Valdez, Alaska, June 2021, directed by Mildred Inez Lewis.

EDNA.....URSULA GOULD
MARGARET.....MARTHA ROBINSON
YOUNG EDNA.....KERIANN GILSON
YOUNG MARGARET.....GRACE GOODYEAR

Special thanks to Dawson Moore, Robyn Ginsburg Braverman and Jayne Wenger, and in fond memory of Ursula Gould.

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SCENE 1

November 2019. A weekday afternoon. Edna is ninety-six years old.

Edna's small, but comfortable apartment in an assisted living facility. The space is tidy, the furnishings are nice, but neither fancy nor new, and have a distinctly midwestern flavor. The living room area includes a couch, bookshelf and rocking chair. An old CD player and an urn sit on the bookshelf, as do numerous books, a few knick knacks, and a small pile of CDs. A telephone is on a side table near the rocking chair. A counter separates the kitchenette, which includes a cupboard, microwave and refrigerator.

Lights sweetly rise on EDNA, in her old rocker, gently rocking.

A moment passes. She slowly hauls herself out of the rocker, her movements slow and deliberate. She carefully walks to the kitchenette, removes a pitcher of water from the refrigerator, and fondly removes a large plastic Chicago Cubs World Series cup from the cupboard, filling it with the water. She replaces the pitcher. One hand holds the counter as she slowly drinks a few sips, lost in thought. She returns to the rocking chair, places the cup of water on the table beside it, then walks to the bookshelf. It takes her a moment to find the CD she wants, get the case open, and put the CD into the player. When she finally accomplishes this, she pushes the wrong button, and the CD slides out again. Mildly amused, after two more tries, the CD is finally in place, and she pushes the play button.

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As Edna slowly returns to her rocking chair, we hear the sounds of Glenn Miller's "In the Mood," or similar tune reminiscent of a 1940s big band slow number. Gratefully, she sits back in her rocker and closes her eyes. Her hands tap out the rhythm of the song, as she rocks. The music fades as lights fade to black.

SCENE 2

November 2008. Weekday, mid-morning. Edna is eighty-five years old.

Same setting as before. Lights up on Edna, asleep in her rocking chair, snoring. After a moment, she is startled awake by her doorbell.

EDNA. Oh! *(Looks around, confused. Picks up the phone receiver from the table by her side.)* Hello? *(Looks at the receiver, punches a button, tries again.)* Hello? *(Doorbell rings again.)* Oh! *(Replaces the receiver, tries to speak loudly.)* Door's open! *(Pats her hair in a half-hearted attempt to spruce up, then talks to herself.)* What time is it? *(She looks around as if looking for a clock, finally notices her watch.)* For heaven's sake, Edna. *(Doorbell rings again. She hoists herself up out of her chair.)* Keep your knickers on. I'm comin'. *(Door opens. MARGARET enters.)*

MARGARET. There you are! Thought your door was locked.

EDNA. It's been sticking lately.

MARGARET. I was about to check with the girls downstairs. But here you are!

EDNA. As usual.

MARGARET. We did say ten, didn't we?

EDNA. Probably.

MARGARET. You seem a little discombobulated. *(Margaret settles on the couch as Edna crosses to the kitchenette, retrieves a pitcher of water from the refrigerator.)*

EDNA. Just tired. Didn't sleep well last night.

MARGARET. What else is new. Cissie coming over tonight?

EDNA. In time for dessert.

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MARGARET. Nice to have her around again. Don't know what tempted her to move back, but I'm glad. *(She notices Edna opening each cupboard door in turn, peering inside.)* What are you looking for?

EDNA. My Cubs cup. *(Margaret sees the cup on the bookshelf and points to it.)*

MARGARET. There's been a sighting!

EDNA. How did it get over there? *(Retrieves the cup, returns to the kitchenette and fills it with water from the pitcher.)*

MARGARET. Think we'll live to see our Cubbies win a World Series?

EDNA. No.

MARGARET. You should be more hopeful, Eddie. A Cubs win might help our prospects for the afterlife.

EDNA. Want a glass of water?

MARGARET. No thanks. I'll just have to pee again.

EDNA. Tell me about it. *(Returns the pitcher to the refrigerator, crosses to her rocking chair. Sits. Sips her water.)*

MARGARET. You hear about Suzanne Overmeyer?

EDNA. Did I hear what?

MARGARET. Suzanne. From down the hall. She's next door now.

EDNA. No big surprise. There's hardly anything she can do for herself anymore.

MARGARET. Such a depressing place, next door. Bunch of old folks just staring into space. I'd rather jump off a cliff.

EDNA. Know of any cliffs nearby?

MARGARET. That could be a problem.

EDNA. What's a problem?

MARGARET. Do you have your hearing aids in?

EDNA. *(Checks her ears.)* I have one of them in.

MARGARET. So you can filter out half of what I say?

EDNA. So I can what?

MARGARET. *(Louder.)* Put the other one in. *(Edna checks the pockets of her sweater, then leans forward, searching the floor.)* What are you doing?

EDNA. Looking for my other hearing aid. *(Margaret sees the hearing aid case on the table near the rocking chair.)*

MARGARET. Try the case.

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EDNA. What? (*Margaret crosses to Edna, picks up the case, hands it to her.*)

MARGARET. I should start charging a finder's fee.

EDNA. It won't be in here, Mags.

MARGARET. Isn't that the case?

EDNA. I put them both in this morning. (*Opens the case, removes the hearing aid and stares at it.*) Maybe that was yesterday morning. (*Inserts the hearing aid.*) Did you ever imagine life could get so ridiculously mundane?

MARGARET. You don't enjoy chatting about our bathroom habits?

EDNA. Or who has been moved next door.

MARGARET. You know, Cissie pointed out to me, there are two directions to go next door from here. The nursing home is on one side, the cemetery on the other.

EDNA. Yep. She says we're squeezed between bad and worse.

MARGARET. But for us, "going next door" always means the nursing home. Always. Nobody even mentions the cemetery.

EDNA. When you head that way, you're not really going anywhere.

MARGARET. Well, I hope I don't go either direction.

EDNA. Best of luck.

MARGARET. I want to die in my sleep and then it's cremation for me. If I go first, you can keep me in a little urn on your shelf. Talk to me daily, if you like.

EDNA. I never thought about cremation. Ray bought our plots out at Maple Hill years ago.

MARGARET. That's one way to plan for the future.

EDNA. His Uncle Orville was an undertaker. Convinced him it was a good idea. Our spot does have a nice view of that row of old maples.

MARGARET. Which you will no doubt enjoy.

EDNA. There's room for you, too, if you'd care to join us.

MARGARET. What do you mean, there's room for me?

EDNA. Oh, you know how Ray could never pass up a sale. There was a special deal if you bought four plots together.

MARGARET. Just who did he think would take up residence?

EDNA. Cissie asked the same...

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MARGARET. Wonder if Cissi feels young when she visits us.

EDNA. She is young.

MARGARET. If we're eighty-five...

EDNA. I don't think there's any "if" about it.

MARGARET. That makes Cissie...

EDNA. Fifty-seven. My baby is fifty-seven.

MARGARET. And just last night we saw her in the senior play.

EDNA. I wish it was last night.

MARGARET. We have gone through several different lifetimes, don't you think, Ed?

EDNA. Nope. Just the one.

MARGARET. You know, I have this very clear memory, of when I was about ten, hangin' out on the footbridge by myself. And I remember thinking I had been a kid for a long time, and I thought I just might be a kid forever.

EDNA. We know how that turned out.

MARGARET. Seems like yesterday, and it seems like a million years ago. *(They sit in a comfortable silence.)*

EDNA. Where *are* your ashes gonna go? 'Cause there's not much room on my bookcase. Or in my cupboard.

MARGARET. Edna, you know I don't have any family left.

EDNA. Isn't there a niece? In Canada somewhere?

MARGARET. You're grasping at straws. My grandniece lives in Toronto and we barely share Christmas cards. You and Cissie have been my family for a long time.

EDNA. Are you telling me it's a real possibility I might end up with you in an urn on my shelf?

MARGARET. Get rid of a few knick knacks and I could fit right next to William Blake.

EDNA. That'll be cozy.

MARGARET. Oh, don't worry. Cissie said she would scatter my ashes.

EDNA. Cissie. When did she tell you that?

MARGARET. I don't know. A few years ago. I wrote it out for her. By Shady Lane, near the old tracks. Where the big elm used to be. The one-

EDNA. -with all the initials. "MT plus BH..."

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MARGARET. I always pretended it was-

EDNA. -Bradley Holdman.

MARGARET. Poor Bradley.

EDNA. I don't think he minded.

MARGARET. I have been on my own for so long, it's hard to imagine life any other way. If you can call an apartment in assisted living being on your own.

EDNA. You have the most independent spirit of anyone I know.

MARGARET. Of necessity. But it's been a good life, for the most part. Just wish the end of it wasn't so... unpredictable.

EDNA. It's all unpredictable.

MARGARET. I do not want to end my days drooling down my chin, asking for my mother.

EDNA. Maybe you won't have to. They serve enough high fat food here to stop anyone's heart. *(They share a laugh. Sit in silence.)*

MARGARET. I came across a photo of the old threesome the other day. You, me and Barbara. Tucked into a copy of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, of all things.

EDNA. Barbara.

MARGARET. Taken in the old park, near that funny little playground they tore down.

EDNA. She deserved more years than she got.

MARGARET. Yes. She... she did.

EDNA. But at least it happened in the right order for her.

MARGARET. The right order?

EDNA. She didn't outlive her kids. *(Margaret notices Edna has teared up. Edna stands, slowly moves to the counter, looking for a tissue, then finds a crumpled hanky in her pocket.)*

MARGARET. This isn't about Barbara, is it. *(No response.)* Eddie?

EDNA. I'm sorry, Margaret. She wanted to tell you herself.

MARGARET. She... who... Cissie? Tell me what? *(A terrifying moment passes as Edna gathers herself.)* Edna...?

EDNA. Cissie has cancer.

MARGARET. What?

EDNA. Pancreatic cancer. Stage Four.

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MARGARET. Oh my god.

EDNA. She was diagnosed... she was diagnosed over a year ago.

MARGARET. Why didn't you tell me?

EDNA. I didn't know. She didn't want to tell me until she knew more and... understood her options.

MARGARET. Well, what are they?

EDNA. Nothing that would change the outcome.

MARGARET. But aren't there treatments? Surgery? We're getting a second opinion.

EDNA. She already has. And a third. Short of a miracle, she might have... a year. Maybe.

MARGARET. So she's come home to... Oh, Edna. *(Begins to softly cry.)*

EDNA. In spite of how unpredictable life is, you end up making assumptions. You just do. But after Ray was gone, I had to rethink everything. Rebuild a life for myself and for my precious little girl. And once I managed to get Cissie through her teen years, and finally launched on her own, I let myself breathe a little easier. Everything is going to be okay. Everything is going to be... But of course, it isn't okay. That's just a train you get to ride for a little while. If you're lucky. This is so unexpected. And so unfair. If only I could give her... If only she could... *(She closes her eyes. Margaret continues to softly cry. As lights fade to black, we hear a single whispered word in the dark.)* Please.

SCENE 3

September 1985. Saturday morning. Edna is sixty-two.

The large country kitchen of Edna's house has a table and two chairs, stove, refrigerator, counter, cabinets or cupboard, and the same rocking chair. A container of instant coffee sits on the counter. On the table is a cardboard box that arrived by mail. It has been opened, and packaging has been cast aside, on the table and the floor nearby. Gentle morning light rises on Edna, talking on the wall phone. Her cup of coffee sits on the counter, out of reach.

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EDNA. Uh huh... *(Listens.)* Uh huh, well... *(Listens.)* Oh, I don't know. What do you think? *(There is a knock on the door. We hear the door open, as Margaret yells from off stage.)*

MARGARET O.S. Edna! You decent?

EDNA. *(Into phone.)* Hang on a sec. Margaret's at the door. *(Covers mouthpiece, yells to Margaret.)* Kitchen! *(Into phone.)* I'm just not sure if... *(Listens as Margaret enters. Edna motions to the cup and saucer on the table. Margaret spoons instant coffee into the cup, gets the kettle from the stove, pours in hot water. Sits and stirs. Edna speaks into the phone.)* Maybe if I was selling Mary Kay... *(Margaret reacts to this comment with amusement. Edna ends the call.)* Okay. I know you do. I will. Bye bye. *(Hangs up.)* Cissie sends her love.

MARGARET. How is my favorite goddaughter?

EDNA. Your only goddaughter is just fine. I think. Busy. You know how life goes a mile a minute when you're that age. *(Crosses to pick up her coffee. Takes a sip, then dumps the remainder in the sink.)* Was that water hot enough?

MARGARET. Just. *(Edna checks the kettle for water, lights the burner beneath it.)* You know, Eddie, if you would put your phone on a little stand near the table, you could drink your coffee while you talk.

EDNA. You mean while I listen.

MARGARET. That too.

EDNA. I like my wall phone. It's what I'm used to. If I moved it, I would just keep going to the wall every time the phone rings.

MARGARET. Point taken. Now what's all this? *(Motions to the box and packaging.)*

EDNA. A "telephone answering machine." Apparently. From my daughter. She thinks I need one.

MARGARET. Why would you need an answering machine?

EDNA. May I quote you? *(Margaret goes through the box and removes another smaller, commercial box.)*

MARGARET. Do you mind?

EDNA. Be my guest. *(Margaret sets the answering machine in its box on the table.)*

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MARGARET. We have two at the high school now. One in the nurse's office and Fredericks has one.

EDNA. That makes sense, I suppose. The nurse and the principal. Hard to believe Fredericks is the principal now. Although he did spend a lot of time in that office in high school.

MARGARET. Don't even get me started. The mystery at hand, however, is why Cissie thinks *you* need an answering machine.

EDNA. She wants to leave me messages. According to my finger-on-the-pulse daughter, everybody has one now. So if you call and someone is out, you can leave them a message.

MARGARET. Or you could just call again.

EDNA. And what if the line is busy? You'd have to call again, anyway. Margaret, I swear, she talks to me as if I live in the Stone Age. I know what an answering machine is. *(Margaret gives her a knowing look.)* Well, I mean... I've seen them. Maybe not up close, but there was a program on T.V. *(Kettle whistles. Edna turns off the burner, prepares her cup of instant coffee and sits, stirring.)*

MARGARET. You don't have one at the library yet, do you?

EDNA. Why would we need one of these at the library? And what do you mean "yet?"

MARGARET. People might call with questions.

EDNA. And I am there to answer them. Most days. It's not like the phone is ringing off the hook. It's a library, not the stock market.

MARGARET. I think it's sweet that Cissie wants to bring you into the twentieth century.

EDNA. I have lived my entire life in the twentieth century. Did you stop by to borrow my horse and buggy?

MARGARET. Not after last time. *(They laugh and sip their coffee.)*

EDNA. Nineteen eighty-five. It does sound strange.

MARGARET. My sophomores read Orwell's *1984* last year. I could barely believe we had arrived. One of my students called the book "dated."

EDNA. We're the ones who are "dated."

MARGARET. I don't know, Ed. We keep up pretty well. College educated, avid readers, and unlike our mothers, neither one of us has spent

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all of our adult years stuck in a kitchen. (*Edna looks around the kitchen.*)
You know what I mean.

EDNA. It's just that nobody tells you how to be sixty.

MARGARET. Sixty-two.

EDNA. Bit shocking when you suddenly arrive. I suppose I should take a look at this. (*Pulls answering machine box toward her and examines it.*)

MARGARET. Can't hurt.

EDNA. I hope you're right. (*She reluctantly begins to open the box as Margaret gathers the packaging.*) Don't throw anything away! Just put it all back in the box it came in.

MARGARET. Why?

EDNA. In case I decide to return it.

MARGARET. To Cissie?

EDNA. Oh. Well. I still think I should keep the box and all the packaging.

MARGARET. And again I ask... Why?

EDNA. I might want to donate it to the church rummage sale.

MARGARET. Okay, Eddie. But before you firm up your plans to dispose of your daughter's little attempt to update her mother, we are going to make every effort to get your new answering machine up and running. Then you can decide. (*Edna removes the device from the box and places it on the table.*)

EDNA. Now what?

MARGARET. And you call yourself a librarian. Read the directions. (*Edna fishes around the box, comes up with a directions booklet. Hands it to Margaret, who hands it back.*) Sorry. I only do English Lit.

EDNA. You gonna help me with this thing or not? (*Margaret takes the booklet, skims it. Turns the answering machine around to look at the back of it.*)

MARGARET. Okay. You'll need an outlet, of course. Then you plug your phone in here, and...

EDNA. How would I do that? My phone is on the wall.

MARGARET. Yet another reason to ditch the wall phone.

EDNA. I am not remodeling, just so my daughter can leave me a message once a month.

MARGARET. She calls you every week.

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EDNA. Yes, but I'm usually home.

MARGARET. I might leave you a message. (*Edna knowingly stares at Margaret.*) Well, okay, I probably won't. But somebody might. Why don't we go ahead and record the... (*References the directions.*) "outgoing message."

EDNA. Remind me again why I need this thing?

MARGARET. You don't. But Cissie sent it, so let's try it out. It'll be fun to record your message. You loved drama class. Just think of it as a tiny monologue.

EDNA. A tiny monologue. Just what I need. (*Margaret retrieves a pen and small pad of paper that sits near the phone. Returns to the table. Sits.*)

MARGARET. Your scribe is ready. Let's compose your message.

EDNA. I thought people were supposed to leave messages for me.

MARGARET. Correct. But when they call, and you're not here to answer the phone, this handy little machine will answer the call. Haven't you ever heard the recording when you call Peterman's Hardware?

EDNA. Why would I call the hardware store? It's only three blocks from here.

MARGARET. Right. Okay. When the machine answers the call, your cheery little voice will let them know they have reached the correct number and you would be delighted if they left you a message.

EDNA. I doubt it.

MARGARET. Let's just look at the examples. (*Points this out in the directions.*)

EDNA. I am not going to say any of that.

MARGARET. Of course not. Something a bit more... eloquent.

EDNA. I don't have to do this every day, do I?

MARGARET. It's a tape, Edna. Just record your message, and it will play every time the phone rings and you don't answer.

EDNA. You seem to know a lot about it.

MARGARET. I set up the one in the principal's office. Fredericks couldn't figure it out. And you know how good I am at following directions. (*They share a small laugh.*)

EDNA. So. I have to record something. Might as well get it over with.

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MARGARET. (*Writes.*) How 'bout this? "You have reached the home of Edna Winters, town librarian. If you leave a message, I'll call you right back."

EDNA. No.

MARGARET. Why not?

EDNA. I'm due to retire in a few years, and then I would have to record a new message.

MARGARET. You might want a new message by then.

EDNA. Why?

MARGARET. Okay. Scratch the librarian.

EDNA. And I might not want to call them back. Especially right away.

MARGARET. Are you sure you want a telephone in your house? (*Passes pad and pen to Edna.*) You try.

EDNA. (*Writes, then crosses it off. Repeats.*) This is harder than it looks.

MARGARET. Stick with the basics. (*Edna writes again.*) Or Shakespeare. When in doubt, go with the bard. (*Edna finishes writing.*) Let's hear it.

EDNA. "This is Edna. Leave me a message." (*Margaret stares at her.*) Now what's wrong?

MARGARET. It's certainly perfunctory.

EDNA. You said stick with the basics.

MARGARET. And so you did. But there are three suggested message lengths. Five seconds isn't one of them.

EDNA. Well, it should be.

MARGARET. And you might want to be just a little more... friendly. (*Edna takes the directions from Margaret. Reads.*)

EDNA. Wait. I have to keep talking until there's a "beep?"

MARGARET. No, no. The caller doesn't talk until- Edna. Surely you've called Cissie and gotten her answering machine. I know I have.

EDNA. Yes, but I don't use it.

MARGARET. What do you mean you don't use it?

EDNA. I just hang up and call again later.

MARGARET. Uh huh. Okay. Let's think. What would you like to say to that friend or family member who happens to be calling when you're not home?

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EDNA. Nothing.

MARGARET. What do you mean “nothing?” “

EDNA. Well, I’m not home.

MARGARET. I’m warning you, Edna, I will recount this conversation to your daughter. Word for word.

EDNA. No you won’t.

MARGARET. Try me.

EDNA. Well, my first draft was soundly rejected. Now what?

MARGARET. Like I said. You can always go with Shakespeare.

EDNA. That’s more your territory.

MARGARET. Maybe now. But remember in high school when you helped me learn my lines?

EDNA. Oh... what was that play?

MARGARET. The only one we did. *(Edna closes her eyes, sits back. Remembers. Smiles.)* There it is.

EDNA. *(Recites from A Midsummer Night’s Dream.)*

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumbered here,
While these visions did appear.

MARGARET. Perfect.

***THE PLAYT IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—
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