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Thomas L. Qualey

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ANTIGONE ADMITS HER FATHER TO A NURSING HOME

*Thomas L. Qualey**

Some of the players in this one-act fictional melodrama are based loosely on characters originally created by Sophocles. Any resemblance of these players to persons living or more recently deceased than Sophocles is strictly coincidental.

Oedipus, former King of Thebes, is now blind, poor, disillusioned, and in failing health. His physical and mental sufferings torment him. As if his complex psychosocial history weren't enough, he has developed symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. His two daughters, Antigone and Ismene, have tried to care for him since their mother, Jocasta, hanged herself and Oedipus put out his own eyes.

THE PLAYERS:

CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS

ISMENE, *elder daughter of Oedipus*

ANTIGONE, *younger daughter of Oedipus*

TIRESIAS, *a blind prophet*

POLYBUS, *nursing home administrator*

EURYDICE, *director of nursing*

SCENE 1: IN THE FAMILY HOME

[*Curtain.*]

CHORUS: You promised you'd always take care of me. You swore to the gods on Mount Olympus that you would never have others care for me. How could you break such a promise? Don't you feel guilty?

ISMENE: I don't know about you, Tig, but I've just about had it with Dad. He can't put two thoughts together, he keeps us awake all night, he's always

* R.N., B.S.N., M.S.H.H.A., certified in gerontological nursing and in nursing home administration. The author is Director of Nursing at Jefferson Davis Nursing Home, Jennings, Los Angeles, California.

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falling, and he can't even go to the privy by himself. If you want to take care of him, fine, but count me out.

ANTIGONE: But Isie, we have a duty to care for him, and I promised Dad I'd never put him in a nursing home.

ISMENE: That's between you and him. I didn't promise him anything and don't come looking to me for any money. I'm catching the 4:15 caravan to Athens today. I'm not missing the toga fashion show—or all the unmarried buyers sure to be there. We're not getting any younger ourselves, Tig.

ANTIGONE: But after all Dad did for us . . .

ISMENE: Please! He killed his own father, married his mother—our mother—totally confused our lives, and made us the laughing stock of Greece. Have you forgotten all that?

ANTIGONE: I haven't forgotten, but I feel so guilty just *thinking* of not caring for him.

ISMENE: Have you been run over by a chariot or something? We're going broke on sitters, supplies, and herbal remedies of dubious benefit, and all you can think of is spending even more on his care. My only duty is to myself—getting my life back on track and settling down with a rich Athenian. Just leave me out of the whole thing. And don't forget, if you put him in a nursing home *you* are abandoning him, not me. Oh look, here comes that blind prophet. He's the one who caused the family disasters. Out of my way, old man!

[Ismene almost knocks the man down on her way out.]

ANTIGONE: Peace be to you, Prophet.

TIRESIAS: Hey, what's happening? You sure sound uptight. I wouldn't be here for any other dude but Oedipus. I've got my regular office hours. Heck, I don't even like to carry my beeper. So let's get to it. I've got an important sacrifice to make at the Acropolis tonight and I can't be late. Now, you want to know whether to put Dad in a nursing home, eh?

ANTIGONE: Yes. How did you know?

TIRESIAS: I'm a prophet, remember? Anyway, Tig, you can't cure what your Dad's got. It'll be thousands of years before they even give it a name, much less beat it into the ground. Old Oedipus will get worse and then he will die. All you can do is try to make him as comfortable as possible on the way out. Guilt-tripping over it is only complicating your life and this whole scene.

ANTIGONE: You make it sound so simple. Are you sure you haven't missed something here?

TIRESIAS: What am I, some fraud? You'll see my words come to pass, but I'm not about to stand around here dodging insults until they do. Good day.

ANTIGONE: Wait. I'm sorry. I'm just feeling overwhelmed. Yesterday a

messenger brought this wax tablet saying that Dad is eligible for state assistance, but not all expenses are covered. I'm down to my last silver piece. Do you realize how expensive it is to compound the right herbs, spices, and secret exotic ingredients? I hear King Creon could have all the expenses paid, but he's decided that Dad hasn't suffered enough yet.

TIRESIAS: You think that's bad? Why just yesterday, he cut off the funding for the graduate-level prophets' program

ANTIGONE: Maybe I can go to the rest of my family for help. I'll beg them to reconsider.

TIRESIAS: Haven't you been listening? You are *it*, kid! Oedipus is old, broke, and his mind and body are going fast—who in the family do you think is going to come to his rescue? Come on, pull yourself together and come with me to see Polybus, the administrator at Theban Nursing Home and Nurse Eurydice, the home's director of nurses.

ANTIGONE: But if I break my oath to Oedipus, I'll be cursed by the gods, vilified by the citizens, condemned by the king, and probably won't even get a kind word from you, either. I'll go, but my heart's not in it.

[*Antigone leaves with Tiresias.*]

CHORUS: You promised you'd always take care of me. You swore by the gods on Mount Olympus that you would never . . .

SCENE II: OUTSIDE THE NURSING HOME

POLYBUS: Eurydice, have you seen the latest budget cuts the king is proposing? No sooner do we implement one ruling than they suspend it and issue a new one. Scrolls are piling up all over the office and messengers from Athens are running in all day with more!

EURYDICE: I suppose you think it's easier in Nursing Service. Why, just the other day, the new high priest pulled a surprise inspection. He almost sacrificed one of my nurses on the spot; do you know she still hasn't recovered? Say, isn't that Tiresias and Antigone heading this way?

POLYBUS: I think so. It's a shame about our old friend, Oedipus. He's not well, but his daughter isn't helping him or herself by trying to care for him on her own.

EURYDICE: It's not easy to convince people to let go, not only of their loved ones, but of their guilt.

POLYBUS: So true. How do you think we should approach the situation?

EURYDICE: Why not take her on the units so she can see for herself the care our patients receive? I'll let them know she's coming.

[*Eurydice exits.*]

POLYBUS: Welcome, Antigone and Tiresias. I'm glad you've come to us. Tell me, how fares Oedipus? Is he still good at solving riddles?

ANTIGONE: Oedipus sends his regards to his old friend. He still tinkers with crosswords, but he fails in body and spirit—and I'm not much better.

POLYBUS: Let's visit the units while you tell me how I can help you both.

SCENE III: ON THE UNIT

EURYDICE: One person cannot provide all the care a very sick person needs, Antigone. You've tried and you've done well, but your father is becoming less manageable for you. With the help of our trained people, you may actually improve the quality of the remainder of his life.

ANTIGONE: It's just that I hear voices reminding me of my promise to my father/brother

EURYDICE: You hear voices?

CHORUS: You promised you'd always . . .

EURYDICE: Oh, those voices. You can get rid of them by just telling them to go away.

ANTIGONE: Go away and stay away!

[The chorus sits down.]

EURYDICE: I know it's not easy but you must remind yourself that, although you've done your best for your father/brother, it's not enough for his escalating needs. Your only weapon against your guilt is the knowledge that you are doing your best, even now. Perhaps, once Oedipus is settled in, you'd like to meet our staff physician. He's an excellent counselor, plus you've got to see his two trained snakes that coil around a winged stick. It's really amazing.

ANTIGONE: Maybe I'll see him on my way out. Will Oedipus like it here?

EURYDICE: He'll need time to adjust. It's a different environment and he'll notice the change. In fact, he may be displeased at first and blame you. He may remind you of your promise and try to make you feel guilty. Do you think you can handle it?

[Antigone pauses to think. The chorus rises.]

CHORUS: You promised you'd always take care of me. You swore . . .

ANTIGONE: Enough already! Be quiet and leave me alone!

[The chorus sits.]

ANTIGONE: Yes, Nurse Eurydice, I think I'll be all right most of the time. Will you and your staff be available if I need extra help?

EURYDICE: Yes, we'll be there for your entire family whenever you need us. In fact, care for the whole family is one of our services here at Theban Nursing Home. Our administrator will fill you in on all the details, but for now,

take a look at the plan of care we will be developing especially for Oedipus. The plan will help us anticipate his needs and deliver care designed especially for him.

ANTIGONE: [*Reading the tablet handed to her*] Alterations in thought processes . . . Can't you people write in *everyday* Greek?

EURYDICE: We tried to get Homer to write our care plans, but he turned us down. He's blind to everything but poetry. But look at what we'll do for your father. "Approach in a slow, calm manner. Provide a quiet environment and simple directions. Call him by name." We do these things to help him make the most of his remaining abilities.

ANTIGONE: I'm impressed.

EURYDICE: As you can see, we're prepared to deal with his memory deficit, his ineffective rest/activity pattern, his incontinence, his impaired judgment and his potential for injury.

ANTIGONE: Your staff seems well prepared to care for Oedipus and I suspect he'll do better here than he could have at home with me. Let's go to the admitting office and complete the scroll work. And thanks, nurse.

[*Curtain.*]

