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BACK BY FOUR

Dialogues / Drama / 3-4 min
Cast 2 Female x1 Male x1

Ruth has the letter from the doctor on the kitchen table and wants Hal to sit down. Hal has a whole day lined up with a boat motor and a trailer hitch and lunch at the diner. He will not cancel it, and the reason is not what she thinks.

CHARACTERS

RUTH - 70s, has rehearsed this all week and is done waiting for the right moment

HAL - 70s, retired, restless, would rather fix anything in the county than sit at his own kitchen table

SETTING

A farmhouse kitchen just after seven on a bright fall morning, coffee still brewing.

A kitchen, early morning. Coffee brewing. RUTH, in a cardigan, sits at the table with a folded piece of paper under her hand. HAL comes in already wearing his jacket and cap, looking for his keys.

HAL

You seen my keys?

RUTH

By the toaster.

HAL

They weren't by the toaster.

RUTH

Look again.

He looks. They're by the toaster.

HAL

Huh.

RUTH

Sit down a minute.

HAL

Can't. I told Arnie I'd be at his place by eight-thirty. He's got the motor half apart already.

RUTH

Hal.

HAL

And then we're gonna run out to Pelham and see the guy about the trailer hitch, and I figured lunch at the diner, and you could come to that part if you wanted. Get the fish.

RUTH

I don't want the fish.

HAL

You always get the fish.

RUTH

Sit down.

HAL

Ruthie, it's a whole day. I got it all lined up.

RUTH

I know you got it lined up. You've had it lined up since Wednesday. You told me about it Wednesday, and Thursday, and last night in bed.

HAL

So you know I can't sit.

RUTH

Five minutes.

HAL

I'll be back by four. We'll sit then.

RUTH

I have something I need to tell you, and I'd like to tell it sitting down, and I'd like you to be sitting down too. Is that a lot to ask?

He stands there. Keys in hand. Doesn't sit.

HAL

What's the paper?

RUTH

Sit and I'll show you.

HAL

Just tell me what it is.

RUTH

It's from Dr. Okafor.

HAL

Okay.

RUTH

From the scan.

HAL

Okay.

RUTH

Hal, will you please...

HAL

Arnie's got the motor apart.

RUTH

Forget the motor!

Pause. He takes off the cap. Puts it back on.

HAL

It's a nice day. Supposed to be sixty-eight.
First nice day in two weeks.

RUTH

It is a nice day.

HAL

And I got it all lined up.

RUTH

I know you do, honey.

HAL

So I'm gonna go do it. And you're gonna come to lunch. And you're gonna get the fish. And then at four o'clock I'll come in and I'll sit at this table and you can show me the paper.

RUTH

Why four o'clock?

HAL

Because that's when I'm back.

RUTH

Why not now?

HAL

Because now's too early.

RUTH

Too early for what?

Silence. He sits down. Slowly. Keys on the table.

HAL

I heard you on the phone. Tuesday. The nurse called and you took it out on the porch, and I was in the garage with the window open.

RUTH

Oh.

HAL

So I know what the paper says. I don't know all of it. I know enough.

RUTH

Since Tuesday.

HAL

Since Tuesday.

RUTH

And you've been planning trailer hitches.

HAL

I've been planning trailer hitches.

RUTH

Hal.

HAL

Because I figured. I figured if I got this thing lined up, then I got somewhere to be. And if I got somewhere to be, then I'm not sitting at this table. Because once I sit at this table, Ruthie, I'm gonna sit here. I'm gonna sit here the rest of my life. I know myself.

RUTH

(gently)

That's not so long a time to sit.

HAL

Don't.

RUTH

It might not be. That's what the paper says. It's not what you think. It's not fast.

HAL

What is it, then?

RUTH

It's slow. It's years, maybe. They don't know. There's things they can do. It's not good, but it's not what you heard.

He looks at her. Really looks.

HAL

Years.

RUTH

Maybe.

HAL

That's. Okay. That's different.

RUTH

It's a little different.

HAL

Why didn't you say that on the phone?

RUTH

I didn't know you were in the garage!

A small laugh from both of them. Not much of one.

HAL

So. What do we do.

RUTH

Well.

(beat)

I guess you go help Arnie with the motor.

HAL

I don't have to.

RUTH

No. Go. It's a nice day. First one in two weeks.

HAL

You'll come to lunch?

RUTH

I'll come to lunch.

HAL

You'll get the fish?

RUTH

I'll look at the menu, Hal.

He stands. Picks up the keys. Stops at the door.

HAL

Four o'clock.

RUTH

Four o'clock.

HAL

Leave the paper on the table. I wanna read it myself.

He goes. She unfolds the paper, flattens it with her hand, and leaves it there.

END OF SCRIPT