



CHAMP AND HIS FOUR WOMEN

By Art Shulman

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CHAMP & HIS FOUR WOMEN was first produced on October 18, 2019 at T.U. Studios, North Hollywood, California.

Its run was for six weeks.

The play was directed by Stan Mazin. Sound design by Steve Shaw. The Stage Manager was Jody Bardin.

The play opened with the following cast. In order of appearance:

CHAMP	Anthony Backman
PRINCESS	Rebecca Westberg
ESTHER	Leah Bass
CHERYL	Caroline Westheimer
ANNIE	Shelby Janes

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CAST: CHAMP, male age 50-55
PRINCESS, female age 50-55. Champ's deceased wife who now exists
as a figment of his imagination
ESTHER, female age 65+, Champ's neighbor
CHERYL, female, business-like, 5 years younger than Champ
ANNIE, female, perky, 5 years younger than Champ

NOTE: As a figment of his imagination, Princess is visible only to Champ. She cannot touch him (except right at play's end), nor can she move anything. The specifics of her entrances and exits are at the discretion of the director. Presented here are what was used in the original production.

TIME: Present

LOCATION: Living room. On stage are artwork, many framed photos, plants, a pill vial, a trash container, and a sealed envelope with writing on the outside.

The set includes the entrances to the condo, his bedroom, and an office-bedroom.

ACT 1 Scene 1

AT RISE: CHAMP enters with a gym bag holding a wet workout WILDCATS t-shirt, and a sandwich.

CHAMP

(Calling) Anybody home? Anybody? *(No answer)* Of course not. I live alone now. Don't I, Princess?

(PRINCESS enters, remains until Esther's later knock on the door. HE takes the sandwich from his bag.)

Now that I've burned some calories at the gym – a remedy for depression that hasn't worked for me so far – it's time for my sandwich. Ham and swiss on a baguette. Mustard, a dollop of potato salad on the sandwich. If I had to order a last meal, a last meal, it would be this. Ham and swiss, mustard, potato salad.

So, I talk to myself. Aloud. Maybe because I think you might be listening. Which is nonsense. I don't believe in a hereafter. Or descending angels. Or ghosts. But still... sometimes your spirit is so strong that I feel your presence, and you are such a comfort to me on those times when I see

and hear you in my imagination. Though I can never manage to touch you, hold you, so you are never tangible to me. Never permanent.

But then again, what torture it is for me knowing that this sensing of you is false, that I will never again truly see you, hear you. That it will only be imaginings that my mind tricks itself into.

Still, even though it's not the real you, I talk to you, telling you about me. My day.

I could tell you about the stupendous highlight of my day up to now. About the woman I met sitting next to me on our stationary bikes at the gym. The woman who introduced herself as "Cheryl with a 'C-H'".

I had on an old college t-shirt...

(HE removes the WILDCATS t-shirt from his bag.)

... and it turns out she went to the same college as we did – a fellow Wildcat -- but graduated five years after me. She made a couple of conversational overtures, even handing me a business card – a business card!

(HE removes a business card from the bag or t-shirt pocket and sets it down.)

What a surprise! A real estate agent.

But I finally let it be known by inserting my ear buds that I wasn't interested and rode until my thirty minutes on random, resistance level at ten, was completed. My gym experience was the highlight of my morning. The highlight of my morning.

So many memories of you, my Princess. Your artwork. The plant you talked to and gently fondled. All the times depicted in the photographs.

Your pills. The pills you didn't get to take before ... before the end. Your pain was unbearable. Your grimacing gave it away. Though you never complained aloud and took those pills only sporadically. You knew taking them would put you out, and you wanted to be aware of each moment of life that you could.

These pills are very strong. Take too many at once and I'll never need to take any pills again. That might be a good idea for me, if I believed in a hereafter and knew I'd reunite with you. In that case I'd swallow those pills in a heartbeat. And get rid of my heartbeat in this world.

I might anyway. Just pop a whole bunch of them. So easy. So painless. So permanent. The pain of living without you gone. I'm considering. Really considering.

I've been talking to myself for exactly one year to the day. I know it's exactly one year because you informed me one year ago there was something very important I needed to do today. Today I need to open this envelope. (*HE refers to the envelope.*) When it's time. It's not time yet. Soon.

Yesterday the perky woman at the market making my sandwich again asked if I was certain I wanted potato salad *on* the sandwich. I said I was. She commented with a genuinely cheery

smile, “You are sure original.” I nodded at her recognition of my boundless originality. The encounter at the deli counter was the highlight of my day *yesterday*.

Today she wasn’t there.

(HE takes a bite of the sandwich.)

I admit it. I’m a poor cook. You had your faults, but you were a superior cook. You had a feel for what ingredients to use, how to make it look so appetizing on the plate.

I needed to always be with you. God, I even went shopping with you at the mall. Me, who hates to shop! I never deeply understood what love meant until you. It was a physical yearning, not just a sexual yearning, though there was that too. I would have done anything for you. Even go shopping.

Yes, you had faults. One of which was you were reluctant to be critical of me. It’s OK to be supportive, but it’s also OK to be honest. Example. Once, when I was preparing a routine for amateur night at the comedy club I asked you, “Why did the *millennial* moron throw his smart phone out the window? – Because he wanted to see time fly. Millennials don’t have watches. They tell time on their smart phones.”

(SHE laughs.)

You laughed.

Then I intentionally told you something that didn’t make sense, that I knew wasn’t funny. To see how you’d react. “Why did the moron come late to the baseball game? – Because his shoe didn’t fit.” You laughed.

(SHE laughs even louder.)

I asked you why you laughed, that what I said wasn’t funny, that it made no sense. You said...

PRINCESS

Because it was you who said it, and I think you’re funny.

CHAMP

I told you, “Make sure you are in the audience when I next perform at the comedy club.” You responded...

PRINCESS

Champ, when am I ever *not* there when you get up to perform?

CHAMP

The envelope you gave me. (*HE holds up the envelope*) A few days before ... the end.

Today's the big day. Today I need to open this envelope. It says, "Champ, open this envelope exactly one year after I'm gone. Not any sooner. Not any later. Open it just after you've had your lunchtime potato salad sandwich. Can you do that for me?" Signed, "Your Princess".

Today is that day. I've had my sandwich. OK, I didn't finish it, but you didn't say I had to eat the whole thing before opening the envelope.

(HE opens the envelope, removes the letter inside, reads it.)

Dear Champ,

(As we see him silently read the letter, SHE says it aloud.)

PRINCESS

By the time you read this letter I know how much you will have grieved for me. I know you'll never completely separate from me, and I don't don't don't want you to. We nested together, really together, for thirty years. An incredible pair. Princess and Champ.

But a year is a long enough time for you to not really be alive, to not be thriving. And so, you need to open yourself to new experiences, new people beyond me.

Establishing new relationships will never detract in any way from the bond we had. When I was alive I always tried to look after you. And part of my process of looking after you is this advice I give you now. Live, really live, now, before your time is up.

Who knows where you might meet new people who enrich your life! It could be someone who sits next to you at the gym when you ride your stationary bike. It could be a clerk who kids with you when she prepares your potato salad sandwich at the deli counter.

So, forge ahead, my incredible Champ!

(HE reads the ending)

CHAMP

Love, Your Princess

(CHAMP opens the pill vial, dumps pills into his hand, considers. A knock on the door. HE places pills back in the vial, closes it and puts the vial in a drawer, along with the letter, leaving the envelope out. PRINCESS exits. HE opens the door to ESTHER, who carries a basket filled with folded laundry which SHE sets down.)

ESTHER

Last week's laundry. I threw away two socks you gave me last time. They had holes that I wasn't going to mend, and I knew you weren't because you don't know how to sew, just like you don't know how to do laundry.

CHAMP

Thanks.

ESTHER

I also noticed that, as usual, you only had four pairs of underwear for me to wash. Just four.

CHAMP

So?

ESTHER

Richard, there are *seven* days in a week. (Beat) You should change your underwear daily.

CHAMP

Maybe I don't need to. Maybe I like to go commando.

ESTHER

This does not throw me into thumping pulsations of excitement. But please saddle that horse before I pick up your laundry.

CHAMP

I really do need to thank you for doing my laundry.

ESTHER

I only do it because Susie asked me to. She told me the ways you were helpless. While you were passable at taking out the trash, you were lousy at cooking, sewing and laundry.

CHAMP

But I'm handy in other ways. So, we have a deal. You do my laundry and I help you with household fix-it issues. I'd take care of any plumbing problems you had.

ESTHER

I haven't had any plumbing problems in the past year.

CHAMP

I'd handle any electrical issues.

ESTHER

Haven't had any.

CHAMP

If your smoke detectors were a problem.

ESTHER

Hasn't happened. Richard, it seems to me I've worked for a whole year doing your laundry, but you haven't done a damn thing to help me.

CHAMP

That's because nothing went wrong that involved fixing. You should think of me as an insurance policy. In insurance you only make a claim when something bad happens. But if it did, you know my helping hands would be there for you.

ESTHER

So, me doing your laundry is sort of an insurance policy?

CHAMP

You got it.

(HE holds up the wet t-shirt he'd set down earlier.)

Remember to put this in the basket before you leave.

ESTHER

You can put it in the basket. There will be room for it when you take the folded laundry to your bedroom, replace it with your dirty laundry, and return it to me here.

(HE exits with the laundry basket. SHE notices the empty envelope the letter was in.)

What kind of name is Susie for a princess? Princesses should have elegant names -- Margaret, Elizabeth. Or Cinderella, who became a princess after she married that prince charmer who went around trying shoes on hot looking chicks.

(HE returns with the basket filled with clothes to be laundered.)

Whoever heard of a Princess Susie?

CHAMP

I nicknamed her "Princess" because she deserved honor like royalty. So elegant. Such a youthful attitude. So, even as she grew older in years she was still my young Princess.

ESTHER

She told me why she nicknamed you "Champ". When she first used it, you asked, "Does that mean I'm your champion?" She answered, "No. Champ was the name of my cocker spaniel when I was a kid, and you remind me of him." Imagine that! You were nicknamed after a dog.

CHAMP

A cute and cuddly dog.

ESTHER

You, cute and cuddly? Hah! (Beat) So, what did Susie say in the letter she left for you?

CHAMP

How did you know about that?

ESTHER

I'm a snoop. That envelope has been on that table for about a year, unopened. Today it was opened. I read the outside message months ago. So, what did the inside message inside say?

CHAMP

It's private.

ESTHER

I'm not leaving until you tell me. (Beat) Look, I'm your friend, not just your laundress.

CHAMP

If you were my friend you'd respect my privacy.

ESTHER

I guess I'm not that good of a friend. Damn, I thought I was.

(Beats)

CHAMP

Basically, that I should get on with my life. She wrote.

ESTHER

She's right.

CHAMP

Easy for you to say.

ESTHER

Maybe easy for me to say now. But it wasn't so easy when my Michael died. We had forty years together. Forty years. In the beginning, after he passed, I was one of those foolish women who got angry at their husbands for dying. (*Melodramatic*) "Why did you die, leaving me here without you?" Then I reflected -- if I had died first he'd be a fool to think that I died on purpose to spite him. I realized that type of melodrama anger is totally unproductive. So, I dropped it and grieved in a way that just involved feeling sorry for myself. But now my life was frozen by grief.

CHAMP

I never felt angry at Princess for dying. I knew she tried as hard as she could to live.

ESTHER

You were smart. Michael died suddenly -- a stroke. He didn't have a chance. (Beat) Then, at some point I learned to stuff my grief into a side compartment of my mind and close that compartment, knowing I could visit whenever I wanted. Having that compartment allowed me to open up to the real world I still lived in. Now, just about every night when I'm all alone in bed. I open that side compartment and I just observe him, admire him, adore him. The messy way he ate chocolate. How he raised his eyeglasses and squinted to investigate small objects. How once he massacred his thumb while hammering a nail and held in his scream so I wouldn't notice. And on those times when I hear him actually talking, I know it's just me playing mind tricks on myself. And then I fall asleep. (Beat) Listen to what your Princess said to you in that letter.

CHAMP

I'll try.

(As ESTHER exits with the laundry basket...)
You forgot this.

(HE points to the t-shirt he'd left out.)

ESTHER

I didn't forget it. I was just waiting for you to pick up that filthy thing.

(HE sets the t-shirt in the basket. ESTHER exits. PRINCESS enters. HE picks up the business card.)

CHAMP

A real estate agent. Can you believe it, Princess? At the gym. A real estate agent.

(Lights fade.)