

Life Support

By Tom Moran

Setting

Time: Next Tuesday night

Place: A living room in Grand Forks, North Dakota and a call center, location unknown

Characters

RALPH: male, 50's-60's

KATE: female, 50's-60's. RALPH's wife.

EMILY: female, 20's. RALPH and KATE's daughter.

MORGAN: either gender, 20's-30's. A telemarketer.

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(A split stage. Most of the stage is taken up by a middle-class living room, with a couch, an easy chair, a coffee table stage center, and a coat rack stage left. A door to a hallway is upstage, a door to the outside is stage left. Far stage right, separated from the living room, is an office chair and a small desk with a desktop computer: a tech support call center. On the wall are four clocks set to four time zones, labeled "New York," "Chicago," "Los Angeles," and "London." LIGHTS UP on living room, but remain DOWN on call center. RALPH sits behind a coffee table, upon which are arrayed several pieces of fruit. He stares at the fruit with intense concentration.)

RALPH

Grape. Grapana. Grapenfruit. Grapermelon. Guavagrape. Guavarape. (Winces.) Ooh. No. Guavagranate. (Excitedly.) Ooh. Guavagranate. Hmm. Bananassionfruit. No. Passionfranana?

(He picks up a mango.)

RALPH(cont.)

Mango. Passionango. Crango. Crango, unchained.

(RALPH has an idea. He picks up a mango and stares in wonder. He touches it to the cantaloupe.)

RALPH

Mantaloupe.

(He puts fruit down and scribbles on a pad of paper. He picks up a cellphone, dials, waits.) MIME

RALPH(cont.)

(grumbles)

Machine. Great. (Pause, waits for beep.) Lester! Mantaloupe. Huh? Huh? This is the one, Lester, I can feel it. I know we took a bath on the guavacado, but this is different. Our meal ticket! Let's get your guys on it right

away. Oh also, I took a look at my account this morning. I was wondering, is my balance maybe missing a digit? Or two? (He hears noise from the bedroom.) Call me, bud, huh?

(He hangs up as KATE enters from bedroom. He holds up the mango and cantaloupe.)MIME

RALPH
I give you, mantaloupe!

KATE
You mean a half man, half antelope? Is that like a centaur?

RALPH
No. Like a half mango, half cantaloupe.

KATE
(shrugs)
Oh. I liked the centaur better.

RALPH
I'm pretty sure that's beyond modern genetic engineering.

KATE
Are you kidding? They can do anything with computers these days.

RALPH
Would you eat one? I mean, the fruit hybrid, not the man-beast.

KATE
(Shrugs)
I guess I'd try it. Why? Is it a thing?

RALPH
Not yet.

KATE
What are you up to?

RALPH
Oh, you know, just thinking out loud, honey.

KATE
Is there something I should know about?

(RALPH takes a bite of mango, skin and all.)

RALPH

Like what?

KATE

I don't know. Because I don't know about it.

RALPH

Then, no.

KATE

(suspicious)

I'm headed to the market. Do you need anything?

RALPH

Didn't you just go yesterday?

(KATE holds up a handful of coupons.)

KATE

Bargains wait for no man.

RALPH

When exactly did you become my mother?

KATE

Thirty years with you, I think I'm qualified. Besides, I need to pick up dinner. You remember what night it is?

RALPH

I am retired, that's no longer a requirement.

KATE

It's Tuesday. (Pause.) Emily. (Pause.) Our daughter. Is coming. (Pause.) For dinner.

RALPH

(nodding)

Mmm. Right.

(RALPH chews the mouthful of mango. It's awkward.)

KATE

Are you chewing the skin?

(RALPH swallows. It looks painful.)

MIME

RALPH

Of course not.

KATE

What is up with you today?

RALPH

Nothing. it's just my typical, um...

KATE

Tuesday.

RALPH

Yeah. Hey, can you pick me up a guava? And a pomegranate.

KATE

Just one of each?

RALPH

Actually, half of each would be enough. But yes, please, one.

KATE

Okay. I'll be back in twenty minutes. (Goes to exit, and turns back over shoulder.) You know, you can tell me things.

RALPH

(genial but slightly exasperated)

And you can buy me things.

(KATE exits stage left, but looks over her shoulder on the way out. RALPH's mood darkens. He picks up the phone and looks intently at it.) MIME

RALPH(cont.)

Come on, Lester. Good news for a change.

(The phone promptly RINGS.) MIME

RALPH(cont.)

Yaaah!

(He drops it in surprise, then picks it up again and answers.) MIME

RALPH(cont.)

Lester? Hello? (Pause.) Who is this? (Pause.) A what? (Pause.) I have? Oh no! Let me write this down.

(RALPH grabs pen and paper and scribbles something down.) MIME

RALPH(cont.)

Like today wasn't bad enough already.

(RALPH dials the number. RINGING NOISE. LIGHTS UP on call center, where MORGAN sits wearing a headset with mic. MORGAN is indeterminately foreign - maybe South Asian, but it's not explicit. He/she talks in stilted textbook English and adopts a bland, vaguely Southern accent.) MIME

MORGAN

Hello, yes-

RALPH

Oh thank goodness. This is Mister Ralph Hanson in Grand Forks, North Dakota. I just got a phone call that said my security has been compromised?

MORGAN

Mr. Hanson, yes. Please wait a moment. (She types.) That is correct. Our records show that you have recently become infected with a virus.

RALPH

A virus? Are you sure? I don't see how that's possible.

MORGAN

Oh no, it is very common for this to happen. There are very many viruses everywhere.

RALPH

Oh, damn. Listen, can you keep this between us?

MORGAN

What do you mean, sir?

RALPH

Please don't let my wife find out.

MORGAN

Your wife?

RALPH

She won't take it well. She doesn't like mistakes.

MORGAN

Of course, sir. This can be our secret.

RALPH

How did this happen? I'm very careful. My daughter is in cybersecurity and she does all the blockchains and the fireballs. I mean the passwords, they've got numbers for letters and ampersands and asterixes and heaven knows what.

MORGAN

I am sure she is a very capable and dutiful daughter, Mr. Hanson. However, you are misunderstanding me. That is not the type of virus to which I refer.

RALPH

What do you mean?

MORGAN

You have the original kind.

RALPH

Don't follow.

MORGAN

Like flu or the herpes.

RALPH

Wait. You mean, *me*? *I'm* sick?

MORGAN

You are in the affirmative, Mr. Hanson.

RALPH

But ... how can you know that?

MORGAN

Many of your health records are open to the public. We have sophisticated algorithms that enable us to predict precisely when people will become infected.

RALPH

(genuinely impressed)

Sophisticated algorithms. Well whaddaya know.

MORGAN

Highly sophisticated, in fact. How do you feel?

RALPH

I feel great.

MORGAN

You feel great? Are you certain?

RALPH

Yeah! I mean, I feel okay.

MORGAN

Just okay?

RALPH

I did have a little bit of a stuffy nose this morning.

MORGAN

Only a little?

RALPH

Well, I mean. Also I had maybe a cough or two and my chest was - OH MY GOD!

(RALPH freaks out. He starts coughing, feels his forehead, starts to hyperventilate.) MIME

RALPH(cont.)

Oh no. I'm sick. I'm so sick. (Rubs his hands.) I have sweaty palms. Is that a symptom?

MORGAN

There is no need for you to panic, Mister-

(RALPH feels his pulse.) MIME

RALPH

And my pulse. Oh boy, doc, it's in like fifth gear here!
You have to help me! How bad have I got it?

MORGAN

Relax, Mr. Hanson. Take a deep breath.

(RALPH takes a deep breath. Big exhale.
Closes eyes, makes circles with
fingers. Calms down.) MIME

RALPH

Okay. I'm okay. I'm calm. Gentle waves. Summer breeze.
Cattails. Um, lichen. Okay. So how bad is it.

MORGAN

Usually it is fatal.

RALPH

HOLY CRAP! Okay. Crickets. Um, chrysanthemums. Light rains.
Branson. Golden waffles. The PGA tour.

MORGAN

There is nothing for you to be concerned about, Mr. Hanson.
You still have a week to live. Now-

RALPH

A week!

MORGAN

Give or take a week. But-

RALPH

What?!

MORGAN

Please to forgive me, this is not an exact science. Mr.
Hanson-

RALPH

Okay. You - You don't know. This is not true. It's simply
not true. Who are you anyway?

MORGAN

Mr. Hanson, I am a fully licensed medical professional in
the state of (looks at screen) North Dakota. I can assure
you, this is the proper diagnosis. But you have to-

RALPH

Dammit! You have to get me out of this! I can't die! There is so much I have left to do! To say! My god, the stuff I need to tell people! My wife! The things she doesn't know!

MORGAN

Mr. Hanson, please! I can-

RALPH

You gotta help me, doc! I'll do anything!

MORGAN

I am pleased to help you! There is a simple cure.

RALPH

Oh. There is?!

MORGAN

Yes.

(Pause.)

RALPH

Well, then, good.

MORGAN

Do you still intend to now segue into depression and finally acceptance, or can we cease at bargaining?

RALPH

I see you've done this before.

MORGAN

It is a great portion of my job.

RALPH

Keep talking.

MORGAN

I work for a large and highly reputable medical company that has developed a cure for your affliction. It is a cutting-edge technique to reprogram your DNA to fight the virus.

RALPH

My DNA?

MORGAN

Certainly. We do a hot swap on your double helix. Replace some A's with C's, some T's with G's and now your genetic code will be like the Rocky Balboa.

RALPH

That sounds great! Let's do this thing! Where do I go?

MORGAN

You do not go anywhere. You merely have to grant us remote access.

RALPH

Remote access? But we're not talking about computers.

MORGAN

That is correct.

RALPH

Then you want remote access to...

MORGAN

To you. To your body, that is.

RALPH

You can do that?

MORGAN

What model phone do you have?

RALPH

I have the iPhone that our daughter got me. The new one.

MORGAN

Perfect! The most recent three models are all capable for this process.

RALPH

Why have I never heard of this?

MORGAN

It is very much in the fine print.

RALPH

Okay. So what do I need to do?

MORGAN

Nothing, just keep in contact with your phone. You are holding it, yes?

RALPH

Yes.

MORGAN

Perfect. Now hold for three - two - one.

(There is a bright flash of light and a loud noise.)

MORGAN(cont.)

Allow me to suit up myself.

(MORGAN dons high-tech eyewear [in the transparent Google Glass category] and gloves that suggest a virtual reality setup. MORGAN now controls RALPH, and is free to move around the stage shadowing him and manipulating him by rapidly moving the gloves, though it should be clear MORGAN is not really in the scene. RALPH's movements are now stilted and peculiar and remain so as long as he is under MORGAN's control.)

RALPH

Are you ... in?

MORGAN

Correct, yes.

(RALPH lowers the phone and looks around for the source of the voice.)

MIME

RALPH

I can hear you.

MORGAN

You can hear my voice inside your head. And I see through your eyes.

RALPH

I'm not sure this feels right.

(MORGAN moves gloves around. RALPH's arms jerk about robotically.) MIME

RALPH

This definitely doesn't feel right.

MORGAN

Please to relax.

(RALPH's legs and arms jerk as he staggers about the stage. His movements get slightly more fluid, but remain awkward.)

MORGAN

Okay, I now have it. Thank you much for your patience. Now, the first order of business.

(RALPH puts down the phone. He reaches into his back pockets and feels for his wallet.) MIME

RALPH

What are you doing?

MORGAN

A standard procedure, Mr. Hanson. Where can I locate your method of payment?

RALPH

Hold on just a minute, we did not discuss this.

MORGAN

You should not have expected this service to come without cost.

(RALPH walks briefly into bedroom.)

MORGAN(cont.)

A-ha! Bedside table.

(RALPH reenters with a wallet. He leafs through it and removes credit card.)

MIME

RALPH

This is not ethical! You can't force myself to pay for myself! The A.M.A. will be hearing-

(MORGAN makes a firm hand gesture. RALPH's mouth keeps moving but no noise comes out.) MIME

MORGAN

Allow me to just put you on mute for a moment while I run this card. (Moves hand around. Frowns.) Hmm, declined.

(RALPH paws through wallet awkwardly. Cards fly everywhere.)

MORGAN(cont.)

Mr. Hanson, please stop resisting me! Do not force me to reboot you! I assure you you will not enjoy it!

(RALPH grabs another credit card and MORGAN again moves his hand around.)
MIME

MORGAN(cont.)

This is also declined. How you intend to reimburse us?

(RALPH tries to talk but is still muted. He angrily points at his throat. MORGAN waves hand to unmute.) MIME

RALPH

-answer you if I can't talk?! There. They were both declined?

MORGAN

That is correct. Insufficient funds.

RALPH

Oh my God. Oh my God. I'm gonna die.

MORGAN

Mr. Hanson, please.

RALPH
(losing it)
I don't have the money. I have a virus. I'm broke and I
lost the money. I'm going to die. I lost it.

MORGAN
I thought you said we would stop prior to the depression
stage!

RALPH
(blubbering)
I changed my mind!

MORGAN
(hint of Hindi accent slipping out)
Please to not be blubbering!

RALPH
Huh? What's that accent? Where are you?

MORGAN
(aggressively Texan accent)
I am in, um, Bismarck. In the North Dakota.

RALPH
You sound more like Houston. By way of Mumbai.

MORGAN
I grew up in Beaumont, Texas. Pardner. Now how about we
quit the fussin' and a-fightin' and you give me the
lowdown.

RALPH
I lost my money. Our money. I invested it all in new fruit
hybrids.

MORGAN
Such as?

RALPH
The guavacado. The crangerine. The manberry.

MORGAN
Those sound uniformly terrible.

RALPH

You're not the only person to think so.

MORGAN

And isn't avocado a vegeta-

RALPH

It's a single-seeded berry, as a matter of fact! I sunk all of our money into them. And you can see where that went. I had finally come up with a winner too. The mantaloupe.

MORGAN

Would the top half be the man and the bottom the antelope? Or the other way around?

RALPH

Mango cantaloupe.

MORGAN

...because the latter would be a sight to behold, I should say.

RALPH

Are you finished?

MORGAN

Is there another method for you to pay us?

RALPH

Can I put my lifesaving procedure on layaway?

MORGAN

What about your wife? Does she have funds?

RALPH

It was our joint account I drained.

MORGAN

I am very sorry to hear that.

RALPH

Kate, my wife, doesn't even know about it. She's so much better with money than I am. She's out there right now buying our dinner with coupons. That's why I don't have the guts to tell her I lost it all. But it doesn't matter now, does it? 'Cuz I'm a cadaver!

(RALPH mutters incoherently and curls
in a fetal position.) MIME

MORGAN

Mister Hanson! Are you all right?

RALPH

No I am not all right! I am terminal! I am pre-corpse! I am
a dead man freaking!

MORGAN

Mister Hanson! Pull yourself together.

RALPH

Why bother? Why bother?

(Pause.)

MORGAN

(rolls eyes)

Because you are not going to die!

RALPH

But you said-

MORGAN

It is a scam.

RALPH

What?

MORGAN

I lied. You have no virus. I take over your body, acquire
your credit card information, pretend to cure you, and
empty your account. But I cannot do that, as you have
already done it to yourself.

RALPH

You mean I'm gonna live?

MORGAN

You are perfectly well. I just cannot stand to see a man
simper as you have so recently done.

RALPH

Oh thank you thank you thank you!

MORGAN

I should go now. I am very poor at my job.

RALPH

Go? No! Wait! No! Don't go!

MORGAN

Why not?

RALPH

Thank you for telling the truth. I can tell you're not really a bad person.

MORGAN

Of course I am. Look what I do for a living. I am whelmed in shame.

RALPH

We all make mistakes. Hey, I know what it's like to need some money, stat, you know? And you're very good at this.

MORGAN

I am?

RALPH

Oh yeah, you really had me going. I mean, my pulse was like Mach two.

MORGAN

Thank you. For your kind words.

RALPH

In fact. Hey, listen. Do you want to make it up to me? To do me a favor?

MORGAN

What do you mean?

RALPH

Can you control my voice too?

MORGAN

Yes, but-

RALPH

My wife and daughter will be home any minute. Can you please tell them for me? That I'm broke?

MORGAN

Will they not deduce that for themselves?

RALPH

Not anytime soon. That was the joint account, no one checks it much. They both have their own accounts too.

MORGAN

(suddenly scheming)

Really. Okay, I will be happy to help.

RALPH

Great! Please! I just. I love them too much to tell them myself.

MORGAN

That makes very little sense.

(Sound of footsteps offstage.)

RALPH

I hear them.

MORGAN

Excellent. Taking voice control - now.

(MORGAN wriggles hand. BEEP or equivalent noise. KATE and EMILY enter. KATE carries a purse, which she hangs near the door, and EMILY similarly hangs up a backpack. KATE also puts down a bag of groceries. RALPH advances mechanically toward them. MORGAN now speaks through RALPH and his delivery should be stilted. MORGAN lip-synchs the words as RALPH says them.)

RALPH

Daughter! Wife! (to KATE) How was your sojourn?

KATE

Excuse me?

RALPH

I trust you are both well?

EMILY

(looks suspicious)

I was kind of going to ask you that, dad.

(RALPH gives a thumbs-up, but to get the thumb up he has to pry it up with his other hand.) MIME

RALPH

I am all the thumbs up.

KATE

Are you feeling yourself, dear?

RALPH

I must be telling you something. I squandered our funds on spurious items and brought shame upon our family.

KATE

What?

RALPH

I now find myself much in debt. Can I please have your credit card to pay my many arrears?

KATE

You're joking.

RALPH

I am not. Lamentably I have invested greatly in the Mandingos.

EMILY

The what?

KATE

You mean the guavapassionwhatevers you were talking about? You actually put money in them?

RALPH

A princely sum, yes.

KATE

Oh Ralph. What have you done this time?

EMILY

And also, since when do you talk like that?

RALPH

I talk like the Ralph dad you always know.

EMILY

Then, what's my name?

RALPH

You are daughter.

EMILY

Not category, name.

RALPH

You are Ralph's daughter.

(RALPH notices their purse and backpack and mechanically crosses to them.)

RALPH(cont.)

Never mind. I see purse. I will handle this myself. Thank you.

(He advances toward purse and begins to rifle through it.)

KATE

Hey! Knock that off!

(KATE goes to purse and tugs on other end of it. Fighting ensues.)

KATE(cont.)

You give me that back!

RALPH

I cannot. I have myriad financial needs!

(They both tug at ends of the purse, eventually RALPH comes away with it. He empties the purse on the floor and picks up a credit card.)

EMILY

Cover his eyes!

KATE

What? Why?

EMILY

Trust me! I know what this is.

(KATE tries to cover RALPH's eyes.
RALPH fends her off and curls into a
defensive ball on the floor.)

RALPH

This account is also insufficient in funds.

EMILY

What? Mom. You're broke too?

KATE

Can we discuss this later?

(RALPH has gotten up from crouch and
awkwardly moves toward the coffee
table.)

MORGAN

Mister Hanson! I ask again please to stop resisting!

(With a supreme effort, RALPH grabs the
notepad and painfully scribbles
something, which he shoves toward
KATE.)

KATE

(reads)

"Trace call. Ralph robot." What?

EMILY

A-ha! I knew it! Mom! Toss me Dad's phone!

(KATE sees RALPH's phone and tosses it
to EMILY. EMILY hits a button. RALPH
attempts to rush EMILY as KATE fights
him off.) MIME

RALPH

Return that to me! That item is not yours to possess!

EMILY
(to phone)
Take that, tech support!

(EMILY types on phone. Another flash of light and noise, and RALPH goes limp. MORGAN exits and LIGHTS DOWN on call center. KATE hovers over RALPH.)

KATE
Ralph! Ralph! Are you okay?

EMILY
Give him a minute, mom. He was being remote controlled by somebody.

KATE
Who? Why?

EMILY
(shrugs)
Ask him. Some shyster or another.

KATE
He is such a sucker sometimes. But he's okay now?

EMILY
He will be. He's just ... restarting.

(RALPH comes to and sits up groggily. EMILY retrieves a laptop from her backpack, sits down and starts to type rapidly, while also studying RALPH's phone.)

RALPH
Wow. That sucked.

KATE
Are you okay, honey?

RALPH
I'm sorry, Kate. It all seemed like such a good idea.

KATE
You mean the mantaloupe?

EMILY

Mantaloupe? Is that a-

RALPH

Mango plus cantaloupe!

EMILY

Oh. I figured it was a stingray that runs off to get married.

KATE

Anyway. You mean the Frankenfruit was a bad idea? Or letting somebody from Nigeria commandeer your central nervous system?

RALPH

Yes. But they were actually from Bismarck. Except probably they weren't. (Pause.) I just. I thought I was into something big. I wanted it to be a surprise.

KATE

It was that.

RALPH

Sometimes I think maybe I'm just in the wrong century.

KATE

We all make mistakes.

EMILY

Do we now?

RALPH

Oh right. Is your account empty too? What's going on?

KATE

I ... I made some poor investments.

EMILY

Mom!

RALPH

In what?

KATE

A.I. toilets. (shakes head.) They were always so angry!

RALPH

Kate! But you're so much better with money than I am.

KATE

Maybe with the small stuff. I guess we're both just a couple of suckers.

RALPH

I'm sorry I got scammed. But I'm more sorry that I had to be possessed to be honest with you.

KATE

This is what happens when we don't talk.

RALPH

I agree. How about from now on we don't not talk?

KATE

Works for me.

EMILY

This is also what happens when you guys invest in whatever doohickey is featured in USA Weekend.

KATE

Not that there's anything left to invest now anyway.

EMILY

Oh, I don't know about that. So Dad, were you just keeping that call going so I could track the origin of the remote access signal?

RALPH

(running with it)

Of course. I saw enough episodes of the Rockford Files and T.J. Hooker in my day to know what you have to do to trace a call.

EMILY

Hmm. That's actually ... completely inapplicable here. But hey, good job.

RALPH

Did it work?

EMILY

Check this out.

(EMILY makes call on phone. Cellphone RINGS. Lights up on MORGAN in call center, who answers her cellphone.)
MIME

MORGAN

Hello yes?

EMILY
(in robotic voice)
Please hold for an important message.

(EMILY fakes HOLD MUSIC and counts down from three to one with fingers. Flash of light and loud noise. EMILY makes a triumphant gesture, pulls VR glasses and gloves out of her backpack and puts them on.) MIME

EMILY(cont.)
I do enjoy a bit of payback with my dinner.

(EMILY walks over to the call center, taking up position behind MORGAN.)

EMILY(cont.)
Now. Let's see what the balance is in your corporate account, shall we?

(She wiggles her fingers in anticipation. MORGAN also wiggles her fingers, as she is under EMILY's control. RALPH and KATE look at each other, wriggle their fingers in imitation, and smile. Blackout. End of play.) MIME