

Keys to Her Kingdom

Dorey Schmidt



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ArtAge Publications

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KEYS TO HER KINGDOM

by Dorey Schmidt

CAST

SYLVIA: Woman, 70s-80s, active, but conflicted.

HANNAH: Woman, 70s-80s, brisk, opinionated.

RUTH: Woman, 70s-80s, soft calm nature.

DEE-DEE: Sylvia's daughter, caring but controlling.

MORGAN: Social worker (M or F), staff member at VistaView.

Place

Living room in a small apartment in VistaView retirement community.

Time

The present. Late afternoon.

Production Notes

This play may stand alone or be used as a discussion starter for senior issues which include driving, family relationships, health, independent living, pets, etc. It is suitable for a fully-mounted production, staged reading, or performed using readers theatre.

Setting: A living room, Small table with phone front center, a small sofa or love seat, a single chair, dated furnishings, family photos suggestive of an elderly resident.

At Rise: Stage is empty. Rattle of keys. Door opens. Sylvia, well-dressed, but visibly agitated, enters with her purse and bag of cat food in one hand, plus a small cat carrier in other hand. She puts the bag and her purse on table. Crossing to the couch, she sets the carrier on the floor.

(SOUND CUE: Cat meows loudly)

SYLVIA: Ohh, Kitty. This has been a terrible day for both of us. (*taps cat carrier gently*) I know you're upset. But the vet said you need to stay in there for now.

(*SOUND CUE: Cat meows loudly*)

SYLVIA: You might as well hush. I've got more problems than your sick stomach. (*jumps up*) It really wasn't my fault. But Dee-Dee won't believe that. (*paces back and forth*)

SYLVIA: Maybe I won't tell her. But Dee-Dee will notice the broken tail-light. Maybe I could hide the car until it's fixed. But I don't have a garage now. Just a parking space.

(*There's a knock on door. It opens slowly.*)

SYLVIA: Oh, no ! If that's Dee-Dee...

HANNAH: Yoo-hoo. (*enters*) Didn't mean to scare you.

SYLVIA: Hannah?

(*RUTH crowds into the room behind HANNAH*)

SYLVIA: And Ruth. How did you get in? For a minute, I thought it was Dee-Dee.

HANNAH: No, just us. (*holds up keys and rattles them*) You left your keys in the door. Again. (*hands keys to SYLVIA*)

RUTH: So, we came on in. Is this a bad time?

SYLVIA: No, not really. I just got home.

HANNAH: We know. We were out walking. Our daily constitutional. Gotta keep the old blood circulating.

RUTH: We try to walk every afternoon, but my constitution doesn't seem to get any stronger. (*laughs*)

SYLVIA: I may be walking a lot more . . . soon. Won't you have a seat?

HANNAH: That depends. Where's your cat?

SYLVIA: Kitty's in her carrier. You don't have to worry. She won't pester you.

RUTH: That's the strangest thing. Cats always seem to go straight to the person who doesn't like them.

HANNAH: I never said I don't like cats. I just don't like them *on* me. I think I may be allergic.

(SOUND CUE: Cat meows)

SYLVIA: Uh-oh. She heard your voice. Hush, Kitty. Hannah doesn't want you in her lap. I just brought her back from the vet, and her feelings are pretty ruffled. In fact, so are mine.

HANNAH: Okay, tell us about it. We saw your car when you parked it. Does the other car look as bad as yours? *(giggles)*

RUTH: Sylvia's car doesn't look that bad. The important thing is, what happened?

SYLVIA: You girls may think you're very funny, but I don't think it's funny at all.

HANNAH: Were you hurt? Do you have whiplash? Some idiot rear-ended me once at a stoplight. I was in therapy for six months. I still have my neck brace if you need it.

RUTH: Hush, Hannah. Accidents happen. I don't know any driver who's never had at least one little fender-bender.

SYLVIA: Well, you're looking at one. I never had any accident until now.

RUTH: Do you have auto insurance?

SYLVIA: With a five hundred dollar deductible. But that's nothing compared to what I may lose.

HANNAH: Then spill it. What's bugging you?

SYLVIA: I don't want to talk about it.

RUTH: Come on, Hannah, let's go. I think Sylvia's too upset.

SYLVIA: No. Wait. Don't go. Please sit down.

(All sit)

SYLVIA: I had to take Kitty to the vet. Then I drove over to PetSmart to get some special cat food. When I came out and got in the car —

HANNAH: *(interrupts)* Someone was rushing to get your spot and banged into the back of you.

SYLVIA: No, but no matter how it happened, Dee-Dee will blame me, and Sammy will want to know all the details.

RUTH: Just tell your kids it wasn't your fault...was it?

SYLVIA: No. I was backing out of my parking space and another car behind me backed out at the same time. Neither of us saw the other, so we hit right in the middle.

HANNAH: Did you look both ways before you backed?

SYLVIA: Of course I did. I always do. I didn't see a car coming either way, or any taillights behind me.

HANNAH: So you kept on backing, and there was a big smash, right?

RUTH: Hannah, can't you see she feels bad enough?

SYLVIA: Read my lips: It's not the damage to the car that's troubling me. That can be fixed. But now my children will want me to stop driving. They've already talked to me about it.

HANNAH: Oh, no. The old time-to-take-away-Mom's-keys game.

RUTH: It's not a game; it's a serious question. Everyone who lives long enough has been there and done that. Or will someday soon.

SYLVIA: I'm not everyone. I'm *not* ready to give up my car. No way.

RUTH: I wasn't either.

SYLVIA: Then why did you stop driving? You're younger than I am.

RUTH: I was having mini-strokes. Not safe, for me or the other people on the road. I could pass out any minute. When I watched my grandson drive away in my pretty little red car, I could hardly stand it.

HANNAH: That's what other people have told me. So I'm not going to give up my car until I'm ready. I'm strong and healthy, and Sylvia is, too.

RUTH: Hannah, dear. Even healthy older people can have problems, like poor vision or hearing.

SYLVIA: Dee-Dee and Sammy keep talking about my cataracts. But I had them fixed last year. My vision is better than 20/20.

HANNAH: Mine's good, too. When I renewed my driver's license, I passed the eye test just fine.

RUTH: You mean that test where the clerk holds up her fingers and asks how many? (*sarcastically*) That's a really sophisticated eye test, isn't it?

SYLVIA: Now, girls, don't fuss. I need you to help me think this through.

HANNAH: What's to think about? Just don't do it. Don't let your kids tell you when it's time to stop driving. When I renewed my license, the state gave me permission to drive for five more years.

RUTH: But that could change. Some states test elders every year or two—

HANNAH: (*interrupts*) And some busybody states want to take away licenses based on age. That's not fair at all.

RUTH: The state tells us when it's legal to start driving. Why can't they tell us when to stop? What's wrong with that?

HANNAH: We should make our own decisions about when to stop. Lord willing, that won't be any time soon for me.

SYLVIA: Girls, please. This isn't helping me.

RUTH: She's right. Let Triple A and AARP fight the legal battles for us. Syl needs our advice and support right now.

HANNAH: Okay, okay. I'll zip it. But my advice is don't let your kids pressure you into stopping. It's got to be your decision.

SYLVIA: Dee-Dee and Sammy treat me like a baby sometimes. When I turned 75, they started trying to take care of me. I know they love me and mean well. But I'm not incompetent!

HANNAH: That's for sure. You became our bridge champion and organized our chorus—all in only six months!

RUTH: More to the point, you're a good driver! When you drive me to the doctor or dentist, I've never once had to grab the dash or stomp the floor at a stoplight.

SYLVIA: Thanks, Ruth. But Dee-Dee and Sammy haven't ridden with me in a long time. They automatically jump into the driver's seat, even when we go in my car. How can they judge my driving without riding with me?

RUTH: Sometimes it's hard to reason with your family.

(SOUND CUE: Telephone rings)

SYLVIA: *(answering the phone)* Hello? *(panics; covers mouthpiece)* It's Dee-Dee. *(into the phone)* You're coming over? Now? But it's not Saturday. *(hangs up, looks at others)* She's coming over. She'll see the car.

HANNAH: Hurry up! Move it! *(rushes to table, grabs keys, and thrusts them at SYLVIA)*

SYLVIA: I can't. There's no time. She's already in the neighborhood.

RUTH: Calm down, both of you. Dee-Dee has to see the car sooner or later.

SYLVIA: I'm just not ready.

HANNAH: That's understandable. I'm not either. How could we get to friends, church, stores, doctors—

RUTH: And families?

SYLVIA: I know all that. I just wish Dee-Dee and I could talk about things more calmly.

RUTH: You can. Take deep breaths, and count to three before you speak. That's what I do.

SYLVIA: *(a deep breath)* 1...2...3...Okay. That's better.

RUTH: We have to go now. It's dinner time. Come on, Hannah, or someone will take our seats.

HANNAH: They better not. I've been sitting at that table for three years, but some newbie always wants to table-hop.

SYLVIA: Now you girls skedaddle. Dee-Dee will be here any minute. Thanks for checking on me.

(HANNAH and RUTH exit. SYLVIA wanders around room, picking up, tidying tabletops. Stops to look at family photo.)

SYLVIA: Dee-Dee must have been about 12 when this was taken. I've always loved this picture. She was so sweet and beautiful. And Sammy... he was such a rambunctious kid. Too bad they grew up so fast. *(takes deep breath)* 1...2...3...

(DEE-DEE enters without knocking)

DEE-DEE: Mother, what on earth happened to your car? Why didn't you call me? Are you okay?

SYLVIA: Wait, wait. One question at a time. *(reaches to hug DEE-DEE who ducks away)* I'm so glad to see you, dear.

DEE-DEE: Mom, don't get mushy.

SYLVIA: Can't help it. That's what mothers do. Feed you real and emotional mush from the day you're born. But why *are* you here this evening? It's not even Saturday.

DEE-DEE: Mother. Don't play games with me. When I called, I could tell by your voice that you're upset about something. But you didn't tell me you had a wreck.

SYLVIA: It wasn't a wreck. It was a minor accident.

DEE-DEE: Which you weren't going to tell me about—right?

SYLVIA: Not if I didn't have to.

DEE-DEE: Why?

SYLVIA: Because I knew that *you* would be upset.

DEE-DEE: Of course, I'm upset. You could have been hurt.

SYLVIA: But I wasn't. I was backing out of a parking space at PetSmart. Another car across the aisle backed out at the same time. We didn't see each other, so we crunched right in the middle.

DEE-DEE: Well, that's it. Three strikes. It's time for you to stop driving.

SYLVIA: What do you mean? This was my first accident. Anybody can have an accident.

DEE-DEE: Remember last month when you tried to drive to that new shopping mall out on the east side of town? You got lost and had to ask a stranger for directions.

SYLVIA: How is that an accident? The key facts here are that I asked for directions, found the mall, and got home safely. What's wrong with that? If you ask me, that's what anyone should do.

DEE-DEE: It was poor judgment. Look at all of the things that could have happened. You might have taken the wrong road and wound up in the next county. We see it all the time on the news—those *elder alerts* like Amber alerts for children.

SYLVIA: But that didn't happen to me. Why must you be such a worrywart?

DEE-DEE: Easy for you to say. You're not the one who would be blamed. Sam will be all over me if something happens to you. Not to mention what Aunt Alice will say.

SYLVIA: Dee-Dee, please, you're just borrowing trouble. You're being unfair.

DEE-DEE: Unfair? Why is it unfair to want to take care of you? You're our mother. You took care of us, and kept us safe from harm.

SYLVIA: Hmm. That's true. Except for the time Sammy broke his arm falling out of the tree in the backyard. But I didn't take away his climbing privileges.

DEE-DEE: Maybe you should have.

SYLVIA: Let me finish. I only had one small fender-bender. That isn't reason enough for me to hand over my car keys.

DEE-DEE: Aren't you forgetting the first month after you moved in here, and your car jumped the curb out in front of the building and crushed the bushes?

SYLVIA: No, you're the one who's forgetting. You totaled your first car when you were in high school, Thank God, you weren't hurt.

DEE-DEE: That wasn't my fault. Someone ran into me.

SYLVIA: Someone ran into me, too.

DEE-DEE: Mother, what are we going to do? Wait until you have a major accident, and someone gets killed? We agreed that we would talk about this when the time came.

SYLVIA: We are talking, but please don't make me stop driving. Why can't you trust me to make that decision?

DEE-DEE: Because none of my friends' parents stopped driving voluntarily.

SYLVIA: But my driving has always been good, even your Daddy used to say so.

DEE-DEE: Things change.

SYLVIA: You don't know that. When was the last time you rode with me? My friends don't complain about my driving.

DEE-DEE: You mean you are taking other old people with you? Putting them in danger? Have you thought about the liability?

SYLVIA: They don't have anyone to take them to the doctor. They're grateful for a ride.

DEE-DEE: That's not our problem. Besides, I can always take you where you need to go. If I'm not available, then you can take a taxi, or a bus, or whatever.

SYLVIA: Dee-Dee, you have your work, and your children, and your other responsibilities. You may think driving me will be a snap, but please think again. I see what happens to people here when they can't drive. Their kids wear out. Their horizons shrink until life revolves around meals and TV. Do you really want that for me?

DEE-DEE: Of course not. You've always been busy in the community, and church, and everything. You are active and independent. You even had a hard time deciding to move into this apartment.

SYLVIA: Between you and me and the gatepost, it was a tough decision. You know, I don't want to be a burden on either you or Sammy.

DEE-DEE: Mom, you're not a burden. Stop using that word. We just don't want you to be hurt—or to hurt anyone else.

SYLVIA: I'm not stupid. I know that safety comes first.

DEE-DEE: And we don't want to be sneaky or tricky or mean. One of my friends had a fake key made for her dad's car and put it on his key-ring. He never did figure out why his car wouldn't start.

SYLVIA: If he was that confused, he needed to stop driving.

DEE-DEE: Another one just drove her mother's car away one night. Told her it was stolen and that the police couldn't find it.

SYLVIA: How sad! Let's not come to that, darling.

DEE-DEE: Then give me your keys. That's all it takes.

SYLVIA: *(takes deep breath)* 1...2...3...You don't know what you are asking. If I give you my keys, I won't be able to go see my friends, to shop for things I need, to go to the doctor's office, or to church or exercise. I'd be stranded here in my apartment.

DEE-DEE: Mom, don't be a drama queen! Lots of people don't have cars. They use taxis and buses. Friends and family give them rides.

SYLVIA: Then why do most of my neighbors say that the day they gave up their keys was one of the saddest days of their lives?

DEE-DEE: Maybe they're just grumpy old people...

SYLVIA: Dee-Dee, you know that's not true. You've met many of them.

DEE-DEE: But Mother, I can take you anywhere you need to go.

SYLVIA: I know that you would do your best. For a while. But you can't run a Mom's taxi service. You have your own job and family. Let's wait until something like that is really necessary.

DEE-DEE: So you won't give me your keys?

SYLVIA: Not today, darling.

DEE-DEE: I don't understand. But at least you can't drive while your car is in the shop.

SYLVIA: Unless they give me a loan car. *(seeing DEE-DEE's scowl)* I'm kidding!

DEE-DEE: Good. Because I don't have any more time to discuss it tonight. I have to pick up Jimmy from his basketball game. See you Saturday. Bye now.

(DEE-DEE exits)

SYLVIA: Bye, doll. *(She closes door behind DEE-DEE)*

(SOUND CUE: Cat meows)

(SYLVIA goes to open the cat food and pour it into dish)

SYLVIA: I guess that went as well as can be expected. Kitty, here's your food.
(starts to place it on floor)

(SOUND CUE: A knock on door)

SYLVIA: *(answering the door)* Hello, Morgan. Come in. I thought all the staff had gone home.

MORGAN: Hey, Mrs. Spencer. I was on my way, but I bumped into Ruth and Hannah. They told me about your accident, so I wanted to drop by.

SYLVIA: Now, Morgan, you know what I've told you. When you don't use my first name, you make me feel old enough to be your grandmother.

MORGAN: We sure don't want that...Sylvia.

SYLVIA: No, we don't, especially since it's true.

MORGAN: So what happened this afternoon? At VistaView, we really do care about what happens to our residents. That's not just a slogan.

SYLVIA: There's not much to tell. I had a small fender-bender. I'll have them pick up my car in the morning and get it fixed.

MORGAN: Is that all? Your friends seemed to think that you are pretty upset about what happened. Were you hurt? Shaken up, or what?

SYLVIA: My daughter Dee-Dee just came by, and even though it's my very first accident, she's trying to get me to stop driving.

MORGAN: I can see why that would upset you. Do you think there's any physical reason you shouldn't be driving?

SYLVIA: Not that I know of.

MORGAN: Any problems with poor vision or hearing?

SYLVIA: My cataracts were fixed last year, and I get regular check-ups.

MORGAN: So, your vision's probably good for your age, but how about your reflexes?

SYLVIA: (*flexes arm muscle*) My arms are pretty strong, and anyway, my car has power steering.

MORGAN: (*laughs*) That's good, Sylvia, but I'm talking about how fast you respond to traffic-lights and signs and sudden moves by other drivers?

SYLVIA: How would I know? I just drive carefully.

MORGAN: Sounds like you are trying to be a safe and careful driver. Why are you so concerned by what your children are suggesting?

SYLVIA: It's just that, living here at VistaView, I see all these older people around me. They're so...so *limited* without their cars. I just feel sorry for them. Their worlds seem so small without a car.

MORGAN: That's because this country has been planned and built for automobiles, not people.

SYLVIA: I'm sure of that. Even a rocket scientist would have trouble with some of the one-way streets and roundabouts in this town.

MORGAN: So, when you're driving, just avoid them. I do. Plan your route in advance. And especially *don't drive* at high traffic times.

SYLVIA: I think I am still a good and safe driver. I just need to prove that to my children. But I don't know how, with my daughter always so busy, and my son way off over there in Virginia.

MORGAN: Sylvia, solutions are available right here: driving courses for elders, on-the-road tests specifically for older people, even online games to help you check your vision and reflex speed. If you are willing to make the effort, you can become an even better driver...at any age.

SYLVIA: I am willing, but I only use my computer for email and Facebook. I don't think I can find all of that stuff.

MORGAN: You don't have to. I'll find them for you. I'll give you a list of resources in the morning. Meanwhile, just relax. Get your car fixed. And above all, don't worry. We'll work through this, okay?

SYLVIA: Thanks, Morgan. You've already helped me feel better.

MORGAN: Any time, Sylvia. That's what I'm here for.

(MORGAN exits. SYLVIA picks up her keys. She sits on couch and examines them longingly.)

SYLVIA: Post office box. Locker at health club. Apartment key. That's pretty much the size of my world now, isn't it, Kitty? *(holds up car keys)* And my car keys are the master key to open all the others. What am I going to do? I need a win-win answer, Kitty. *(rattles keys at cat)* But I'll think about that tomorrow.

(SOUND CUE: Cat meows)

(SOUND CUE: Telephone rings)

SYLVIA: *(takes deep breath)* 1...2...3...*(answering phone; upbeat)* Hello, Sammy. I had a feeling that you would call tonight. Just say it was mother's intuition.

CURTAIN

“MORGAN’S LIST”

A Discussion and Resource Guide for Elder Drivers **To Accompany the Play *KEYS TO HER KINGDOM***

Is It Time to Give Up Driving?

We all age differently. So, there is no one age when everyone should stop driving. How do you know if you should stop? Getting older doesn't make you a bad driver. But there are changes that may affect driving skills over time.

As a group, the oldest drivers are at a higher risk of having a serious collision per mile driven than any other age group except for those under age 25. Drivers in their late 70's have about the same number of injury-involved crashes per mile driven as drivers in their early 20's. And drivers age 85 and older are injured or killed in crashes at a higher rate than any other age group. This is due primarily to increased fragility that comes with age. Older adults are generally less able to withstand the forces of a crash, so they are more likely to become injured, compared with younger, stronger, and fitter individuals. Older adults also don't typically recover from injuries as quickly as they once did.

See <http://www.seniordriving.aaa.com>

Ask yourself these questions:

- Do other drivers often honk at me?
- Have I had some accidents, even if they are only 'fender benders'?
- Do I get lost, even on roads I know?
- Do cars or pedestrians seem to appear out of nowhere?
- Have family, friends, or my doctor observed my driving and said they were worried?
- Am I driving less because I am not as sure about my driving as I used to be?
- Do I have trouble staying in my lane?
- Does my foot move easily between the gas and the brake pedals, or do I confuse the two?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, this is a good time to check out whether or not you are still a safe driver. Download the following free handbook. It lists resources and assistance to help elders make good decisions about driving: <http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/older-drivers>

Are You A Safe Driver?

Driving at night, on the highway, or in bad weather may already be a problem for you. Older drivers often report difficulty yielding the right of way, turning

(especially making left turns), changing lanes, passing, and using expressway ramps.

What you can do:

When in doubt, don't go out. Bad weather like rain or snow can make it hard for anyone to drive. Wait until the weather is better, or use buses, taxis, or other transportation services. (*Hint: Some retirement communities offer transportation. Use it.*)

Look for different routes so that you can avoid places where driving can be a problem. Left turns can be dangerous because you have to check so many things at the same time. Plan your routes so that you only make right turns. (*Hint: The shortest distance between two points may be the most deadly. Give yourself plenty of time to take a safer route.*)

Have your driving skills checked. Some communities and senior centers have driving programs or clinics that can evaluate your driving. (*Hint: Reluctant to take these tests? Afraid that your driving is impaired? Just do it.*)

Brainscreen No-risk Test. Tailor-Made for Drivers 55 and Over. Accurately assess behind-the-wheel abilities related or associated with cognitive function or abilities. Results not reported to any other person or agency. There is a fee for this test. <http://mature.idrivesafely.com/info/brainscreen.html>

Update your driving skills by taking a driving refresher course for seniors. (*Hint: Some car insurance companies may lower your bill when you pass this type of class.*)

1. AARP Driver Safety Course, available online or in classroom.

Online Course teaches:

- Defensive driving techniques, new traffic laws and rules of the road
- How to reduce traffic violations, crashes and chances for injury
- How to adjust for physical changes over time
- Techniques for handling left turns, right-of-way, blind spots and more...

<http://www.aarp.org/ws/EO/drive-gen-2.html?cmp=NLC-EDO-DSP-0413genA>

2. Mature Drivers Improvement Course (Online—not available for all states.)

Latest information on safe driving. Take this course online anytime and go at your own pace. There is a fee for this class.

<https://driversed.com/courses/mature-drivers-ed>

For More Information

Making good decisions about your driving skills is difficult. Safe driving is important to you, your loved ones, and those who share the road with you. Use these additional resources to help you decide if it's time to give up the keys:

- **American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators** 1-703-522-4200
www.granddriver.info
 - **Federal Highway Administration** Office of Safety
<http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/>
 - www.aarp.org/drive
 - **AAA Information for Senior Drivers** (includes information on medications, safety and mobility AAA's DriveSharp program)
 - www.eldercare.gov (alternative transportation options)
 - **American Medical Association** (older driver risks, driver assessments information, other resources)
 - **The Hartford** (older driver safety, tips on talking to older drivers, family conversations, etc.)
 - **American Occupational Therapy Association**
- If/when I give up my car, how will I get around?**

There may be more ways than you think. Free or low-cost bus or taxi services for older people are offered in some communities, or carpools that you can join without a car. Your local Area Agency on Aging can help you find services in your area. Call 1-800-677-1116, or go to www.eldercare.gov to find the nearest. Retirement communities often have transportation options. Whenever or whatever you decide, remember that human beings existed without cars for thousands of years, and car owners are still only a handful of the world's population. Enjoy your life—be carefree, even if you are car-free.

Best wishes,

Morgan

Compiled by Dorey Schmidt, Ph.D.