

PRESERVATION

a play by

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“In the end, our society will be defined not by what we create, but by what we refuse to destroy.”

--John Sawhill

PRESERVATION

Characters:

Lydia. Female, late 30s. Hair up in a bun until scene five. She means well.

Stan. Male, late 30s. Balding. Protective. He wants to be kind. There's something charmingly old-fashioned about him.

Stella. Female, 80. Loose ragged hair. She's lived a rough life and hasn't aged gracefully but maintains a stern sophistication to her. Sometimes coherent, sometimes lost.

Time:

Around 2015. Late Spring / Early summer. Hot enough to want to soak up the warmth, humid enough to be harmful for old books.

Setting:

A university town. It should have the sense of being everywhere.

An Archival Library:

A dignified building on a campus. Not musty. Clean. It's larger on the inside than it looks on the outside.

The main hall is light and airy. There's a Gutenberg bible. And a copy of an Audubon and glass cases filled with rare books. We don't have to see these. The main atrium leads to an offstage room with puzzles on display, a backroom, and a large double-doored secured room where people can look at archival items.

The backroom leads to a vault where the archival items are stored.

Stella's apartment:

Stacks of old books, and lots of yarn piled neatly in a corner. A table with chairs.

One space can morph into all of the settings. A sheet can cover the table and chairs like an in-process gallery exhibit.

NOTES:

// signals the starting point of overlapping dialogue.

Words in [square brackets] are omitted but may be read at the discretion of the actor and/or director.

A moment – Sometimes very brief. Sometimes longer. Not a full beat. Often a character has a thought process or makes a realization. Or something quickly passes between the characters. A moment should never slow down the propulsion of the play when done right.

Something like Patti Page’s “Tennessee Waltz,” works well for the song in Scene 2 and 4. On the album *Tennessee Waltz*, “Would I Love You (Love You, Love You)” – which follows “Tennessee Waltz,” works well as an unnerving second song in scene 4.

The “Devil Claws” puzzle is available as “The Devil” through Hanayama Metal Puzzles.

Box 1: The Vault / Realia

The backroom of the library. Dimly lit despite the bright afternoon. No windows. Stan, late 30s, stares at Lydia, late 30s. She searches the room.

STAN

This isn't an entrance.

LYDIA

The door was cracked.

STAN

You didn't see the sign around the corner? "Entrance."

She points towards the door.

LYDIA

Shouldn't it be locked?

(Pause.)

All the rare documents and books.

STAN

In the vault.

(He points towards the door to the vault.)

Vaulted.

Or behind glass in the main library.

(He points towards the main library.)

Not exactly easy to walk away with a Gutenberg Bible. Or fly off with an Audubon.

(He knows he's made a terrible joke.)

You're not supposed to be back here. Also, part of the experience is entering through the large double doors. They're very impressive doors.

LYDIA

Isn't it a security hazard, to leave this door unlocked?

STAN

Nobody's ever entered before.

I take sun breaks. Right outside.

Stan waits for her to leave. She doesn't.

LYDIA

(A challenge.)

So, you going to call security?

Stan realizes his predicament.

STAN

Look, I'm being considered for a promotion. My job's kind of at stake here.

LYDIA

If the world was caving, buildings falling and airplanes dropping from the sky- would you let me back here?

STAN

Are you...okay?

LYDIA

Yes.

No.

STAN

Well, that's clear.

LYDIA

I'm fine. Actually.

STAN

Alright then.

(A moment.)

Can I... help you?

(She stares at him. He stops.)

You know, my job isn't greeter today, it's document retriever. There's a greeter in the atrium. It's a really nice atrium. It's generally very quiet and meditative there. Not a lot of people.

(She doesn't move. He's not sure what to say.)

You would just need to exit and reenter through the main door.

LYDIA

I just... need a moment.

A quiet moment as they both stand there. A knocking sound from behind the door to the vault.

STAN

That's the HVAC system.

(Another knock.)

It's a very advanced system. Things have to be carefully regulated around here.

The sound of static over an intercom. A few breaths.

NASALLY VOICE FROM INTERCOM

Ummm...Edgar Allen Poe's hair.

STAN

Shoot. I have to go into the vault.
I'm afraid I can't let you be back here alone.

LYDIA

Are there valuable materials lying around?

STAN

No.

LYDIA

Then what damage could I do?

Stan stares at her.

STAN

As I mentioned, I'm up for a promotion...

Lydia doesn't move.

STAN

Alright, but only because I'm the fastest retriever on staff. They say it takes 30-40 minutes once people put in a request but I can retrieve items in minutes. I know this place like...

He does a gesture signaling how well he knows the place. Lydia watches him.

LYDIA

Can I come down there? Can I see? Like...do you give tours?

STAN

Not of the vaults.

LYDIA

Just checking.

A moment.

STAN

Feel free to just stand around, I guess. I have a record to keep.

As he enters a code, he conceals it. Stan opens the vault door. It's very heavy. She watches.

LYDIA

You must have built up a lot of muscle here.

Stan glances at his arm for a moment. He glances at her as he exits. The click of the vault locking. The minute he exits, she spots the card catalogue. She begins tearing through it, searching.

LYDIA

A...Aardvarks, Abrasions.

(She lands on a card.)

Abraham.

An eerie knocking sound from the vault. Lydia listens, unclear if the sounds are connected to Stan. She continues. She stops immediately as Stan reenters. The click of the vault door as it locks behind him. He shivers. She notices.

STAN

Edgar Allen Poe's hair.

LYDIA

What?

Stan opens a folder and pulls out a plastic bag with a lock of hair in it. Stan looks at his watch.

STAN

Less than thirty seconds.

(He celebrates. Confessing:)

I cheated though. It's our most requested item.

He exits into the library. She quickly returns to shuffling through the Abraham section of the card catalogue. A rasping knock from behind the vault. He reenters.

STAN

My God, what have you—?

LYDIA

Sorry.

STAN

We were preserving that.

LYDIA

The card catalogue? You're preserving the—?

STAN

Nah. We thought about it though.

LYDIA

(Relaxing, realizing he was having her on.)

Oh.

STAN

Nobody on staff can bring themselves to throw it away. We're torn between ditching it and saving it for a future exhibit. Card Catalogues: "Prehistoric googling." Glass Number 35: The Dewey Decimal System." Real sexy.

He eyes her suspiciously.
He looks at the card she's looking at.

STAN

Abraham?

(A moment.)

You know about Abraham?

LYDIA

I know he founded this library.
This town, who hasn't heard of him?

STAN

Some people haven't heard of Whitman. Emerson.
Why are you here?

LYDIA

I'm sorry. Did I do something—?

STAN

I – there's been a lot of conspiracy weirdos lately – seeking information about—

LYDIA

Abraham?

STAN

The anniversary of his death is coming up. It's only been five years. It's a sensitive time. I have to be...careful. I don't want any trouble.

LYDIA

You do this all day? Back and forth?

STAN

When I'm retrieving. It's a good job on days when one wants to be alone.

(A moment.)

Today's not one of those days.

You're local? I haven't seen you around.

LYDIA

I just came back a few months ago to take care of my grandmother.

She's been...driving me mad.

STAN

//Sorry.

LYDIA

But I would do almost anything for her. I think.

A moment.

STAN

What do you know about him?

LYDIA

I know he's practically a religion.

STAN

The man's an institution. I called him Avram.

LYDIA

You knew him?

STAN

Like a father. Practically.

You can – look if you want. Our digital catalogue's more efficient. But you're welcome to—

He would have let you back here.

Lydia continues working through the catalogue.
Stan joins her, standing closer so he can see what she's searching for. He pulls out a few:

STAN

The Dewey decimal system never dreamed of the oddities he collected.

James Joyce's walking stick.

DH Lawrence's faucet. A real "Fount of knowledge."

He waits to see if she gets the joke. She acknowledges it.

STAN (cont.)

Sorry. Plath's childhood poems- covered in spaghetti sauce.
Six boxes of Sylvia Plath's hair. Her mother snuck them in shoe boxes.
We're looking for a more suitable container for the Plath hair.
Body parts are surprisingly difficult to catalogue.

LYDIA

"Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air."
(Stan stares, confused.)
Lady Lazarus. Sylvia Plath.

STAN

Right. Right.

LYDIA

Former English major.

STAN

Cool. Me too.

LYDIA

Who saves hair?

STAN

It was a huge thing back then. Most archival libraries purchase boxes of original documents and notes from authors. Sometimes they come with surprises. All kinds of bric-a-brac crap relatives leave in – hair, toothbrushes, baby teeth, fingernails, you name it. We call them personal effects. Or realia. It's a re-al problem for archivists – I mean what do you do with them? Nobody wants to throw away Franklin Roosevelt's Chamber pot.

Avram relished them. "One man's trash, is an archivist's realia." Towards the end of his life, he was buying documents just for the realia. They were like Easter eggs to him – not that he celebrated Easter.

Samuel Johnson's doorknocker.

A mold of Upton Sinclair's teeth.

A rose kissed by Liszt.

William Howard Taft's enormous underpants though nobody's seen that in decades.

LYDIA

I thought he was against hero worship.

STAN

He was. It's not about hero worship. Offering people access to stuff like Edgar Allen Poe's hair – shows people their hero was a human. Flesh and blood. Just like them.

He was all about inspiring greatness in everybody.

(Lydia continues rifling through the catalogue.)

He had tremendous future-sight.

Now material culture's become practically an academic discipline.

It's the personal items that people seem to be most interested in. Sure, some people come to look at original writings for research, but most want to visit Thoreau's hairbrush.

He delighted in sharing them. Sharing everything. He was a profoundly charitable man.

Lydia pulls out a card. A long pause.

LYDIA

“Oversize No. 63. Box. To never be opened.”

(The knocking sound returns.)

How come this isn't in the online catalogue?

Stan pauses, with suspicion. Considers her.

STAN

We pulled it.

Have you been to this library before?

LYDIA

Not recently.

STAN

Are you sure?

LYDIA

Why are they hiding it?

A moment.

STAN

It was bringing out the lunatics.

LYDIA

What's in it?

STAN

Exactly.

Avram founded the library as a gift under one condition.

Nobody must ever open the box.

LYDIA
And they've really never opened it?

STAN
Never.

LYDIA
Surely. Somebody. You—[Have opened it]?

STAN
In Avram we trust.

LYDIA
You're not curious.

STAN
I'm a believer in Avram. And of mysteries.

LYDIA
And they never will?

STAN
Never.

A moment.

LYDIA
You're not the least bit curious?

STAN
I'm curious why you're asking so many questions.

(A moment.)

Some think there's a Dybbuk in the box.
A demon. Like an evil spirit trapped inside.

Another knocking sound from behind the vault.
Even louder. Lydia looks alarmed.

STAN
That's still just the HVAC system.

A moment. Lydia continues searching through the
catalogue.

LYDIA
What about his hair? Do they have Avram's hair?

STAN

He lost it in WWII. He was 19.
Never grew back. Didn't have facial hair either.
In a culture of beards, he was beardless. And people still had faith.

LYDIA

His baby teeth?

STAN

What do you think?

LYDIA

His toothbrush?

STAN

Didn't save them.
We have his bowler hat. He was famous for it. Always wore a hat. For modesty.
And his glasses. Glasses and a bowler hat.
We have lots of hair- if you want to look at hair. Tennyson's, Napoleon's, Lord Byron's,
Dickens's. As I mentioned: We have boxes and boxes of Sylvia Plath.

(Stan pulls out a card.)

"Folder 5: Hair includes one lock, 1932; one lock, 1938; one lock, July 30, 1941; a tress, August '42; braid, August 22, 1945; and one lock, fall 1949."

They're all in acid free-materials. Hair is a pain in the butt to archive—degrades over time.

LYDIA

"Hair today, gone tomorrow?"

STAN

Ha. You should read Edgar Allen Poe's letter to Sarah Helen. It's like the original post text anxiety. I can get it for you, if you go to the main library.

LYDIA

He didn't leave anything like— a cigarette butt?

STAN

Didn't smoke.

LYDIA

A fingernail?

STAN

He was highly hygienic.

LYDIA

His ashes?

STAN

Tossed into the Sargasso Sea. His request.

LYDIA

There's not a scrap of him?

STAN

Please. Have some respect.

Yes.

(A moment.)

He left no hair.

(Cuttingly.)

Or heirs.

(Pause.)

Plenty of woman interested though.

But he was celibate. And monastic.

It's mostly just his business records. He went to great lengths to keep track of his affairs.

His business affairs. Obviously.

One of the few men whose fortunes were amassed ethically. Whose life was lived ethically.

He once said: Men and women are divine instruments. Build not a house of worship, but a house of words and music—for therein one finds holiness. Worship by creating and loving art and words." "Love and support those who create for they were truly made in God's image."

Why are you really back here?

LYDIA

Because... I want to learn about preservation.

A moment.

STAN

It's a surprisingly crowded field.

It appeals to those who like order and holding onto things.

I was fortunate to get in here young.

LYDIA

How young?

STAN

18. Like I said, he was practically a father to me, Avram.

Stan shivers.

LYDIA

Cold?

STAN

We keep the vault 60 degrees. It's not cold...my body just gets... confused?.
We keep it cool and dark. Light and heat accelerates deterioration.
The last thing one wants is cockling paper.

LYDIA

Cockling paper?

STAN

Cockling paper. Warped covers, cracked emulsions. It could all go to hell.
The books are under constant threat from the world. God help us if this place floods. We've got
somebody down here with the slightest drop of rain checking the seals.
Usually me.

LYDIA

You look like you're freezing.

STAN

It keeps me awake.
When I go down there- it chills my bones. Ever been bone chilled?

LYDIA

You think you'd get used to it by now.

STAN

I never get used to things.
Excuse me. I'm going to step outside. I suffer from horripilation.

LYDIA

Horripilation?

STAN

Goosebumps.
Would you like to step outside with me? It's a lovely day.

LYDIA

I'd like to stay here.

A moment. Stan considers her again.

STAN

You know what the best method of preservation is?

LYDIA

What?

STAN

Good care.

(Stan opens the door to outside. Light floods in.)

Hey, how do you scare away goosebumps?

LYDIA

How?

STAN

Boo. I'm kidding.

The sun.

(To himself, as his eyes adjust.)

Eyes. Eyes.

He exits. The strange sounds pick up again. Lydia glances around unnerved. He reenters.

STAN

Goosebumps gone.

He shows her.

The sound of something moving from inside the vault.

LYDIA

You hear that?

STAN

It's the cross-breeze.

LYDIA

What else is it like down there?

STAN

A lot like a maze.

The ceiling is tall.

It's like a crypt down there, but the air is alive – not dead.

LYDIA

What else?

Stan leans in closely.

STAN

There's a cabinet that leads to Narnia.

(A moment.)

STAN (cont.)

Other than the kind of creepy puppet room, it's mostly just archival boxes and locked cabinets.

LYDIA

Am I making you nervous?

STAN

Why?

LYDIA

You have goosebumps again.

STAN

(Lying.)

Probably a trick of the light.

What are you researching? Other than preservation?

A moment.

LYDIA

Genetics.

STAN

You're researching Abraham's genetics?

LYDIA

My genetics.

STAN

Abraham was celibate.

LYDIA

He was human.

STAN

He was monastic. He lived only for words and by his word.

He was practically a father to me. My actual father – he was not kind.

LYDIA

My grandmother knew him.

STAN

Everybody knew him.

LYDIA

She *knew* him.

LYDIA (cont.)

I think he's my grandfather.

STAN

Impossible.

(Beat.)

Be careful what you say here.

LYDIA

Three months ago, I moved back to take care of my grandmother. She's 80. She's ill. Dementia, I think. We haven't been able to get a good diagnosis.

STAN

I'm...sorry.

LYDIA

Her memory has started to fade.

She never once talked about my grandfather. Until now.

She never talks much. But the other day she said...

She said, "The box. Abraham's box at the library." "The truth about your grandfather is in the box."

STAN

Perhaps it's her dementia.

LYDIA

She says their letters are in there. That it's hundreds of their love letters.

STAN

If that's the case, why wouldn't he have burned them instead of concealing them in a box?

LYDIA

Maybe they were holy to him.

My grandmother's writing is in it.

She says he left her pregnant and stole her voice.

STAN

You have to go now.

Blackout.

Box 2: Life Alert

The next morning. A cloudy day.
 Stella's home.
 Stella, 80, sits at the table. Lydia puts a bowl in
 front of Stella.

LYDIA

Sugar flakes?
 (Stella stares at her.)
 [I'm] kidding- [they're] just raisin.

STELLA

For dinner? You're feeding me cereal for dinner?

LYDIA

Breakfast.
 (A moment. She shows her watch.)
 What time does it say?

STELLA

9. You're feeding me too late.
 And feeding me shitty cereal. Elder abuse.

LYDIA

9 am.

STELLA

Trying to make me feel crazy.

LYDIA

Okay, Grandma.

STELLA

I already had breakfast.

LYDIA

When?

STELLA

(Agitated.)
 At breakfast.

Stella points to the orange juice on the counter.
 Lydia picks it up. It's warm.

LYDIA

When did you—? Grandma, did you get up earlier?

(She realizes.)

Jesus, Grandma. You were wandering the house at—what 3 am? You could have fallen.

(Beat.)

Where's your life alert system?

(Stella points at Lydia.)

The device they gave you. You're supposed to always wear it.

(Stella shrugs.)

Did you leave it in the bathroom?

Lydia starts to search. She stops. She sits back down.

LYDIA

Fuck it. It's too early for this.

Lydia slams back coffee. Slowly, Stella eats. She watches Lydia eating.

STELLA

You should eat less. You're getting fat.

LYDIA

Okay, Grandma.

STELLA

Who's going to marry you when you're fat?

They eat. A moment.

LYDIA

I met somebody yesterday.

STELLA

Who?

LYDIA

A guy at the library.

STELLA

He probably thought you were fat.

(Beat.)

Sugar flakes. I want the sugar flakes.

A moment.

LYDIA

Put the orange juice away.
We put things away after we use them.
Put it away and I'll give you sugar flakes.
Go on.

Stella creakily stands. She picks up the orange juice.
She starts to put it in the fridge. She drops it. It
spills.

STELLA

(Nonchalantly.)

Darn.

Lydia stares at her.
Stella starts to bend over. It's hard for her. Lydia
stands. She cleans up the orange juice.
She opens the fridge and hands the rest of the juice
to Stella.

LYDIA

(Peeking in.)

Shit. How are we low on groceries again?

Stella puts it in the fridge. A moment. Lydia reaches
into the fridge. She pulls out the life alert system.

STELLA

Hey. You found it.

Stella sits back down.

LYDIA

Grandma, what's the life alert system doing in the fridge?

STELLA

Chilling.

LYDIA

That's not funny.
This isn't cheap. If it broke- it could take months for them give us another. If they give us
another. You know what this is for, right?
Do you have a death wish?

Stella shrugs. A moment.

STELLA

No.

LYDIA

Good. Grandma, why was this in the fridge?

STELLA

I was putting the orange juice away.

(Beat.)

What if I don't hit the button in time? A lot of good this thing will do me.

What if I fall and can't hit the button?

LYDIA

It has fall detection. It knows.

I have this half, alright?

(She shows her a small device on her keychain.)

If you fall, it'll alert me.

STELLA

What if I throw it?

LYDIA

Why would you throw it?

(No answer.)

Don't throw it.

STELLA

What do you think I am- senile?

LYDIA

You're either senile or infuriating. Which would you rather?

STELLA

Infuriating. Obviously.

LYDIA

You want me to leave you alone? You want me to go out?

You want me to meet somebody? What do you want for me?

My wrists ache from carpal tunnel from tutoring writing remotely. My back is starting to curve from being in front of the computer all day.

Jesus, I'd be really easily indoctrinated into a cult right now.

We can't afford a private nurse.

And I don't know how to be your private nurse.

A moment.

STELLA

I spent all afternoon alone yesterday.
 (Beat.)
 You let the zombie people take my brain.

LYDIA

The zombie people?

STELLA

The...
 (Stella impersonates a zombie.)
 You left me with the living dead. For years.
 You spend too much time around them, you start to lose your brain.

LYDIA

(Catching on.)
 It was only six months. *And* maybe if you were nicer, the people at the retirement home would have let you stay.

STELLA

That's not why they sent me home.

LYDIA

(Testing Stella.)
 Then why did they send you home?

STELLA

Resources.

LYDIA

See. You have it together.

STELLA

You'd have left me there forever if the—if if we hadn't run out of — run out of —
 (She can't find the word.)

Care.
 I'm not senile. You let them eat my brain.
 I have very clear memories.
 It's Reagan has memory problems. You know what he says?
 "I have three problems I need to tell you about."
 "I'm having trouble with my memory..."

STELLA & LYDIA

"And I can't remember the other two."

STELLA

How did you know?

LYDIA

I don't know Grandma; how did I know?

A moment as it sinks in to Stella why she's heard it before.

STELLA

You know that time – when you were a little girl? You had on those— red saddle shoes. And you started crying – for no reason – crying, bawling. And I asked you why – and you said, “It’s because I lost something.” “Well, what?” I asked. And you looked even more distressed. And you said:

(Impersonating her.)

“I don't know.”

It's like that. It's like that – it's like – losing something – and you don't know what you've lost.

A moment.

LYDIA

That never happened.

STELLA

Yes, it did. Of course, it did. And your teddy bear – what was his name? Later we got home and it turned out your bear was missing.

LYDIA

I never had a teddy bear.

STELLA

Because you lost the first one. I wasn't going to buy you another.

LYDIA

I never had red saddle shoes. Also, when were you a [part of my childhood]? You were with me when I was a teenager – after my mom—

(She realizes.)

My mom, Grandma. I think you're thinking of my mom.

STELLA

Oh. Oh. Of course, your mom. Yes. How silly. It was your mom. She was a shit. Always losing things. All the drugs.

LYDIA

Okay, Grandma.

STELLA

ALL the drugs. A real shit. Coming home filthy with a baby.

(A moment.)

They say losing your memory is a terrible thing. I say empty me out.

Lydia pours her sugar flakes.

LYDIA

Here.

STELLA

What am I, five?

LYDIA

You want them or not?

STELLA

Fine. Just spill them.

(Feigning joy.)

Yummmmm. So, good.

A moment. Lydia sits across from her.

LYDIA

I need you to tell me more about the box.

STELLA

What box?

LYDIA

Abraham's box.

STELLA

Who?

LYDIA

Pictures. We were looking at pictures. I was asking about our family history. And you—

(Lydia stands. She retrieves a photo album.)

See, Grandma. Here. We were looking at pictures and you told me about Abraham. Abe. You call him Abe.

Stella stops. She sits quiet. She eats the frosted flakes.

STELLA

Never heard of him.

A moment.

LYDIA

The other day, you said with such conviction— like it was critical. Like those “letters in the box” were going to change your world.

Grandma, were you— messing with me? With this Abe thing? I need to know.

And there could be money involved, okay? If he’s really my grandfather- there’s money. It could help you. Us. It could help us. It could pay for that medical bill. And other bills. It could make you more comfortable.

STELLA

(Re: a photograph.)

Who’s that? She’s pretty.

LYDIA

Who do you think?

(Realizing Stella really doesn’t know.)

You.

STELLA

Hey. I’m a stunner.

(A moment.)

I think I still have that dress.

LYDIA

Where?

STELLA

Box somewhere.

(Looking at the picture.)

My breasts were way firmer.

(To Lydia. Pointing to her breasts.)

Wait until those start to go. I’d take my breasts over some memories.

(A moment. Stella stops, upset.)

What’s going to happen to my things?

LYDIA

What do you mean?

STELLA

What’s going to happen to my things?

Stella is becoming agitated.

LYDIA

Music. Do you want to listen to your music?

Lydia grabs an MP3 player.

LYDIA

It's a bummer we can't play it on the record player.

Lydia hits play. We hear the music. Something vintage and nostalgic that would send anybody who came of age in the 50s on a memory wave. Stella almost instantly transforms.

She moves her shoulders.
She dances in place. Lydia watches her.

LYDIA

It's the music. Isn't it? The music brings it back.

Stella stops for a moment.

STELLA

Don't play the // second song.

LYDIA

Second song. I won't.

Stella gets back into the music.

LYDIA

Why not?

STELLA

It's horse manure.

Lydia notices a letter on Stella's empty chair. She picks it up.

LYDIA

Grandma, why were you sitting on your medical bill?
What, like it's going to hatch?

STELLA

It made you run off yesterday.

As Lydia watches Stella move to the music. She hugs her.

STELLA

Don't hold too hard. You'll snap me.

(Lydia pulls away.)

I'm kidding.

(Lydia holds her again.)

Yeah, not too tight. My bones are crappy. Don't let it go to the second song.

Beat.

LYDIA

I won't. I went to the archival library yesterday. I met a man.

A strange strange man.

STELLA

(While listening to the music and dancing/swaying.)

He was a strange strange man.

LYDIA

Grandma?

STELLA

He wore a strange strange hat.

And he had no hair...

LYDIA

You mean Abraham?

STELLA

He understood my sense of humor.

He used to say, "When it comes to family, you can have gold in front of you and claim it's only fools." "Learn carefully. Knowledge is a will'o'the wisp."

I used to be a spinster. And then I was a mother. Now I'm a knitter.

LYDIA

You're talking about Abraham? Abe?

Stella grabs Lydia's hand.

STELLA

It's all in the box.

All our letters are in the box.

LYDIA

Why don't you have his letters? If you were writing each other?

STELLA

He took them.

LYDIA

What's the box look like?

STELLA

Silver. It's in an ornate silver box.

Your grandfather gave it to me. And then he took it away.

(A moment, bitterly)

I never lived comfortably, but I sure as hell want to die in comfort.

LYDIA

I'll go back to the library- alright. Soon.

I've got to get more groceries now. You carry this end.

(Lydia fastens the life alert system onto Stella.)

And I carry this end.

If you have a real emergency, push the button.

Only if it's an emergency. Not just if you want me. Okay? Don't scare me.

If I don't respond in time, it sends an ambulance. We can't afford an ambulance, okay? So, unless you have to, don't push the button. I'll answer it in time.

Try not to fall, alright?

STELLA

The music.

Lydia hits a button on the MP3 player.

LYDIA

There. I skipped the second song. See?

Lydia starts to walk towards the door.

Stella reaches towards the button on the life alert device.

LYDIA

Only if it's an emergency.

Box 3: A Puzzle

Later the same week.

The main atrium of the library. Airy in contrast to the first scene – full of light despite a gloomy day. Glass boxes filled with ancient books.

Stan stares at Lydia.

LYDIA

The back door was locked.

STAN

I'm on front duty today.

Sven's retrieving.

His record is twenty minutes. Not two.

(A moment.)

That's our Gutenberg.

LYDIA

Still up for that promotion? I didn't – [fuck it // up for you] ?

STAN

I'm still—

It's for head curator of Avram's collection.

LYDIA

Congratulations.

STAN

Don't congratulate me yet. They've only been hiring PhDs for curator positions. My odds aren't that high.

We're shifting our gallery around later this evening for the gala.

That's why so many of the cases are empty.

I'm in charge of the gala. It's like a test.

You're welcome to be here. Everybody is welcome to be here.

As long as they behave appropriately.

(A moment.)

When it comes to Avram and the box, this library has a long history of dealing with fanatics.

I'm not saying you're a fanatic.

LYDIA

You're greeter today?

STAN

Kind of. I'm docent. Tours and stuff.

LYDIA

(Glancing around at the empty space.)

Tours for who?

STAN

And stuff.

(A moment.)

We get more people on less gloomy days.

There's a tour in a minute.

Stan looks around. She continues standing.

LYDIA

Am I... making you nervous?

STAN

No. No.

Lydia walks over to the Audubon.

LYDIA

Mourning Dove.

STAN

That's our bird of the week.

That's our Audubon. It's one of 119 complete copies in the world. It's one of the more valuable items in the library. Valued at ten million.

LYDIA

M-o-u-r-n. I always thought it was Morning Dove. M-o-r-n.

STAN

Misnomer.

LYDIA

Mind blown.

STAN

We flip a page in the Audubon every week and live tweet it. We call it "flipping the bird."

LYDIA

Your idea?

STAN

Yea. It'll take 8.5 years to work through the entire Audubon set. We have a following. People show up faithfully each week to see the new bird.

She continues wandering.

STAN

That's a first edition of the Canterbury Tales. There's only a dozen in the world.
That's one of the first printings of the Bill of Rights. Jefferson's initials are on some of the pages.

She pauses in front of another glass.

LYDIA

Is this your tour?

STAN

No. Yes.
That's the first appearance of Spiderman.

LYDIA

Abraham collected that?

STAN

Nothing was unholy to Avram.

(She returns to the Audubon.)

On Friday, we'll turn every book in the library to page one. Audubon will be "Volume 1, Plate 1" Wild Turkey in honor of Avram's life.

That's when they'll announce it. If I get the position.

You should check out some of the other rooms. We have miniature books on display. They're my favorite. Avram collected 16,000 miniature books.

Also, mechanical puzzles.

Like Rubik's cubes. And obscure ones. We have 30,000 of them. They're meditative. Avram liked mysteries.

(A moment. He holds out his mechanical puzzle.)

I'm stuck on this one.

(Beat.)

You can listen to the books. We have ancient choral books out this week. Decorative letters, colorful hand-drawn music. We had choirs sing some of the pages. It's a lot of Gregorian chant, but there's some really striking pieces. We have one for the Tanakh. For Ecclesiastes.

She continues standing. Not saying anything.

LYDIA

My grandmother passed away yesterday.

STAN

I'm sorry.

LYDIA

I know she was old, but- it was unexpected.

STAN

Are you—?

LYDIA

I'm fine.

(A long moment.)

She paid for my college with her retirement money.

(She laughs.)

I wonder if she knew the type of debt that buys.

Probably she knew.

You know why I think she was telling the truth? If she was lying, she would have used it over the years. She would have teased me with the possibility of being the love grandchild of somebody famous. It was such a sore spot, she was silent about it. I believe her because of her silence. She never talked about my grandfather until now. She raised my mother alone.

STAN

That must have been hard.

LYDIA

Thank you.

(A moment.)

It's funny how somebody can define you who you know almost nothing about.

Have you seen the box?

STAN

Yes.

LYDIA

Is it silver?

STAN

I guess you could call it silver. Maybe more like gunmetal.

(A moment.)

It's probably empty.

LYDIA

You've looked inside?

STAN

Just guessing.

It would be the ultimate philosophical //mind—

LYDIA

Mindfuck?

STAN

Yea.

And also, because it would be a metaphor – for the mystery of things.

LYDIA

God is in the box?

STAN

No. More like a final philosophical lesson. What's in the box is faith.

Or a lesson, that one should always keep a side of themselves a mystery.

LYDIA

You're probably overthinking this.

I called a forensic lab.

Any item of clothing. A skin cell. A cup, or a bottle could be used to prove a genetic link.

A letter, a stamp with dried saliva.

A moment.

STAN

I'm sorry for your loss.

LYDIA

Even just a small item – one of those miniature books – Could pay – our expenses.

Dying is expensive.

STAN

So is forensic analysis.

(A moment.)

I'm sorry- you could put in a request, but I can tell you now there's no way the library will release archival materials for that.

LYDIA

Why not?

STAN

The chemical testing would destroy the item.

Also, you have no evidence.

LYDIA

She knew what the box looked like.

She knew it was a silver box.

STAN

Your grandmother lived in this town her whole life?

LYDIA

Yea.

STAN

She could have seen it. We've put the box on display.

LYDIA

Don't you want to know if she's telling the truth?

A moment.

STAN

I think you should leave now.

LYDIA

I have a right to be here.

I have potentially more than a right to be here.

STAN

Even if you could prove a genetic connection.

He didn't leave anything for anybody. He left them for everybody. He left everything to the library – under one stipulation...

LYDIA

Perpetuity law in this state grants the next of kin inheritance. Unless explicitly stated that no offspring are to inherit his fortune – the will is meaningless. He must have known that.

STAN

We can't release anything from the library.

Especially for genetic testing.

Scandals are not in the library's interest. Even if they found nothing, that test would make the news.

LYDIA

We could do it quietly.

STAN

It would get out. To have recklessly left a child and a mother in the world while collecting millions of dollars in documents – would undermine his credibility.

You shouldn't go around saying things – like you're saying – people believe things. Without evidence. They believe things.

You think this place pays for itself with just his money? It's seed funds. The place is supported by donors. Do you have any idea how much it costs to run an archival library? You think a public library is at risk? A private library is ALWAYS at risk. The whole place is hanging by a hair.

Which I guess is ironic because he didn't have any.

LYDIA

I—

STAN

Listen, I've started to lose my own, because of the stress of it. I've thought about collecting it. Sticking it in a baggy and preserving it in a vault. Archivist's former hair. Evidence I once had some. Or maybe if you live in a vault long enough- you start to lose it.

LYDIA

I just want the truth.

STAN

Avram was honest. People know him as an honest, giving man. And he was. A seminal figure. A germinal figure. And he was funny- "A bald head leaves more room for the brain to breathe." People aren't just investing in the library, they're investing in him. In his legacy and his ideas. I was raised by them, okay? They're good and I genuinely believe in him. And he was GOOD. He wouldn't have done that.

(A moment.)

He was a wealthy benefactor, poet, artist and holy man. He was NOT a scoundrel.

LYDIA

Since when are those mutually exclusive?

STAN

This is his temple. Have some respect.

The man who raised me was not kind. But Avram was.

I've devoted my life to him.

I know you're mourning. But all you're proving is that if anybody achieves a modicum of goodness in the world, there's somebody out for blood.

LYDIA

My voice sounds like her voice.

It's weird.

I saw pictures of her when she was younger. I have her hair.

STAN

Was your grandmother kind?

LYDIA

No.

STAN

Then why follow in her footsteps?

A long awkward beat.

STAN (cont.)

Sorry.

(Not sure what to say.)

Your grandma had nice hair.

LYDIA

Thanks?

Guess my brain will just have to suffocate for it.

STAN

Maybe the more you care about something, the more you begin to resemble it.

You know why he was celibate?

LYDIA

He was married to God?

STAN

He was married to words.

LYDIA

(Realizing.)

You're following all of his values?

STAN

Yes.

It hasn't been difficult in this town.

(A moment.)

A dead cat.

LYDIA

What?

STAN

That's what's probably in the box.

(A moment.)

You know, Schrodinger?

Or maybe it's a puzzle.

LYDIA

Why would he put a puzzle in the box?

STAN

Because then it's truly unsolvable.

He fiddles with the puzzle he can't solve. A moment. He tosses it to her.

STAN

Hey. It's called the Devil's Claw. See if you can solve it.

Lydia doesn't bother looking at it. She puts it in front of him at his desk.

LYDIA

You sure you can't bring company down to the vault? To give me a tour?

STAN

I wish.

LYDIA

Aren't you the one in control?

STAN

No. His wishes are. I'm protecting his legacy. And my job. And this institution.

LYDIA

Didn't he preach "knowledge through self-knowledge." Maybe he would have wanted me to open it.

A moment. Stan doesn't know what to say.

STAN

You know his teachings?

LYDIA

There's a book on my grandmother's shelf. Too bad he never signed it. It'd be worth lot more.

STAN

He didn't believe in autographs. He believed we define ourselves by the words we leave behind and by our actions. Also, he didn't want people to feel like they owned a piece of him through his signature, but by embodying his actions and words.

LYDIA

My grandmother left behind throw pillows, a dozen knitted sweaters, a record player and a dress. You know where they're going? The salvation army.

A moment.

STAN

You're not the first.
You're not the first to claim he had a lover. Or a child.

STAN (cont.)

What do you think all the conspiracies are about?
All the “bastards” come out of the woodwork when someone with wealth passes.
I know you’re good. I know you just want to believe it.

LYDIA

Thanks for – at least - listening to me about my Grandma.
I have no one in this town to – [talk to].

A moment. Lydia picks up a pair of headphones.
She places them on her head.

He watches her listen to the books.

He watches her wander around the atrium.
We hear the music from the books.

STAN

This is a place that is sacred.
There aren’t enough places that are sacred.
Or there are – but they don’t stay sacred long. Somebody always wants to desecrate it.
(For a moment they catch each other’s eyes.)
Try track 32.

The Byrds’ “Turn! Turn! Turn!” briefly plays.

STAN

I snuck that one in as an Easter egg. Not that I celebrate—[Easter]. Yea.

LYDIA

I didn’t realize the Byrds plagiarized Ecclesiastes.

STAN

Technically Pete Seeger did. Well, adapted it.

Lydia looks at Stan’s puzzle. She has an epiphany.
She picks it up. She plays with it for a second.
She solves it.

STAN

How did you—?

She demonstrates.

LYDIA

Imagine two legs – passing through each other.

She shows him again.

STAN

Huh.

(A moment.)

Look, you can see the box. If it helps.

You're in luck. We're bringing it up for the gala this evening.

See that display case? The empty one right there?

We're putting it in there. It's a...tradition.

LYDIA

You didn't say anything about it earlier.

STAN

We don't advertise it anymore. It brings out the crazies.

I didn't want you to...cause trouble.

LYDIA

Thank you.

A moment.

STAN

You'll see it's not that interesting. It's just a box. It's less mysterious when it's out in the open.

There's just one thing. You'd have to go to the gala as my plus one? Only way I can get you in.

LYDIA

You don't have a plus one?

STAN

I'm...always here.

(A long pause.)

I know the timing is really weird. With your grandmother.

It's okay if you—I mean- I just thought it might help to hear how valued he is. // In this community.

LYDIA

Okay.

STAN

Okay?

LYDIA

Yeah.

STAN

Great.

Also, you need to dress in a costume. 1950s vintage style.

I've been working on mine for weeks.

I'll add you to the guest list.

He hands her a flier with information on the gala.

Lydia, stunned, slowly exits.

A moment of Stan alone. Using her method, he tries to solve the puzzle. Stan can't solve it.

Box 4: A Dress

Later that evening. Stella's home. A murky evening with a threat of rain.

When's breakfast?
STELLA

Tomorrow.
LYDIA

That was a joke.
STELLA

I bought steak. I can like puree it, throw in avocado.
LYDIA

Sounds disgusting.
Fine.
STELLA

There's also spaghetti. We could eat it Sylvia Plath style.
LYDIA

Stella stares at her.

In the archives at the library. They have her poems from her childhood. Spaghetti sauce on it. It's—
LYDIA

You know that poem? "Do not go gently into that goodnight. Rage rage against the dying of the light." I thought about it all day. While I was alone.
STELLA

That's...
LYDIA

That was clearly written by somebody in their 40s. Who wouldn't want to go gently? You have any idea what it's like to rage at 80? Jesus.
STELLA

I'm going to rage at 80.
LYDIA

Say that when you're 80.
STELLA

LYDIA
 I need to borrow your dress.
 I'm going to a gala.

STELLA
 A gala?

LYDIA
 Like a dance thing. At the library.
 With the curator.

A moment.

STELLA
 Can I come?

A moment.

LYDIA
 I told him you were dead.

STELLA
 Well, tell him I'm undead.
 Why did you tell him I was dead?

LYDIA
 I don't know. I wanted to put his guard down.

STELLA
 Who the hell are you?

LYDIA
 I didn't mean anything by it.

STELLA
 Thanks for the vote of confidence.
 (A moment.)
 What are you – a Dickens character? How did I raise you?

Beat. [She didn't].

LYDIA
 I...bought you a gift. Hold on.
 (Lydia pulls out an old record.)
 There's this vintage store.
 They had this in the back.

Lydia puts the record on. We see Stella light up and listen to the song. It's the same song from earlier. Lydia pulls a dress out of a box.

LYDIA

I'm wearing this.

Stella stares at her.

STELLA

No.

LYDIA

I'm not asking permission.

A moment. Stella pushes a jar off the counter.

STELLA

Ooops.

LYDIA

I respect you Grandma. I love you. But I am wearing your dress. Alright?

STELLA

Selfish.

LYDIA

I'm not selfish. I'm seeking answers. For you.

STELLA

Uh-huh.

LYDIA

For us.
Why wouldn't you want me to wear it?

STELLA

Because I'm "dead."
I understand angry ghosts. Why they tear places apart. Nobody, not even the dead should be alone so long. If I died- I would haunt you.

LYDIA

I'll wear it out of love.

STELLA

What does that even mean? You won't even fit in it. You're too fat.

Lydia ignores the spilled item.
 Lydia removes her clothes in front of Stella. She changes into the dress. At first Stella glances away, and then she watches- with the fascination one gives their half-naked image in a mirror. A moment. Stella looks at her dressed.

LYDIA

You should want me to go. You should say, "Have a great time, Lydia."
 Don't you want me to have a good time?

A moment.

STELLA

Yes.

LYDIA

And I'm not fat. Not anymore than you were apparently.
 Can you get my back?
 Grandma.

A moment. Stella not sure what else to do- tries to do the back of the dress up. It's difficult for her. Her hands shake.

STELLA

You know, it's the one I wanted to hold onto that hurt the most.

LYDIA

Who?

STELLA

She's already gone.

Stella has finished her dress.
 Stella looks at her. She can't help it. There are tears in her eyes.

STELLA

Beautiful.

(Stella looks at Lydia.)

Beautiful.

Stella looks into a mirror. She laughs.

Grandma?

LYDIA

Lydia dances around the room. She offers Stella her hand. Stella joins her for a moment.

STELLA

He used to take me dancing. Dance real slow. The way he held you.
And his words were like a dance.

(A moment.)

Slow down, Abe—sloooow down. These hips are fragile now.

LYDIA

Grandma, why did Abraham leave?

(Stella stops. She doesn't answer.)

Sorry. I'll make dinner, but I have to go shortly.

STELLA

To the...strange man.

LYDIA

To the strange man at the library, yes. Who's actually kind of funny and nice.

The song is almost over. Stella freezes.

STELLA

Turn it off.

Lydia moves to the record player. A moment.

STELLA

No. Let it play.

Lydia, unsure, stops. The second song begins.
Stella slowly backs away. It has a strange effect almost immediately on Stella. She dances with the air.

STELLA

Abe.

Lips, lips- Abraham.

She wraps her arms around herself. Lydia watches Stella as Stella is trapped in a strange fugue.

STELLA

Abe...No.
No.
No. No.
No.
Abraham.
Abraham, STOP.

(A moment.)

STOP.

(Screaming as if her body is being violated.)

STOP. I said STOP.

Please don't. I SAID NO.

Stella curls up. Lydia shakes her head.

LYDIA

No.

A long moment as Lydia fully feels the implications.

STELLA

He told me to write him and I wrote. I gave him my words. He said to put it in a box. And let it sit with his words- so our words would be married- even if we weren't.

I wrote him poems. I wrote him letters.

And then he took. My body. And then he took the box.

He took it from me. He took.

Lydia moves closer to Stella, unsure if she should touch her or offer comfort. Unsure if she's angry for the revelation or hurt for her grandmother. Stella looks at Lydia in the dress.

STELLA

Stay away from Abraham, Stella.

Lydia stops the song.

LYDIA

Grandma.

Stella moves to the table.

STELLA

Steak, please.

Box 5: The Box

Late that evening. A thick night, threatening rain. The Atrium. Post gala. Abraham's box sits in a glass case along with other objects from Abraham's life. Stan and Lydia stare at the box. Lydia wears Stella's dress. Stan wears a well-fitted suit and a bowler hat. They're dressed in classy 1950s attire. They're both a little buzzed.

LYDIA

Nice bowler hat. I meant to say.
It's exactly like the one in the archives.

STAN

It is the one from the archives. They let me wear it one night a year.
I'm kidding. It's from a haberdashery.
Haberdashery. A haberdashery.
(A moment.)
Okay. A thrift store. I just wanted to say haberdashery.
Haberdashery.

A moment. He puts it on her head.

STAN

Feel wiser?

LYDIA

Heavier.

STAN

That's how you know it's authentic.

A moment.

STAN

// How are you [feeling]?

LYDIA

The violin music was nice.

STAN

Yea.

LYDIA

Nobody's coming back?

Not tonight.

STAN

And it's okay that we're – [here].

LYDIA

I'm supposed to be here in case it rains. [To] check for leaks.

STAN

Where can nobody see us?

LYDIA

Sorry?

STAN

There's cameras everywhere – right?

LYDIA

Generally.

STAN

But they can't point everywhere.

LYDIA

Why?

STAN

Trust me.

LYDIA

A moment. Stan glances around.
He moves to a corner.

STAN

Here.

LYDIA

You're sure?

STAN

Yea. Nobody can see you around this spot.

LYDIA

How do you know?

I routinely have to scratch my butt.
I'm kidding.

(A moment.)

No, I'm not.
I'm buzzed.

STAN

You didn't drink that much.

LYDIA

Sven made sure there was extra vermouth in my old fashioned.

STAN

Vermouth isn't in an old fashioned.

LYDIA

Whatever's in it. He put extra.

STAN

Stand still.

LYDIA

Staaaaan.

STAN

Lydia moves close to him.

Can they see me? Here?

LYDIA

Not if you move an inch closer.
(A moment.)

STAN

But you...
Shouldn't move an inch closer.

She moves an inch closer and stops.

I...live by his values.

STAN

Lydia laughs.

//How are you [feeling]?

STAN

LYDIA
 You gave a beautiful speech.

STAN
 Thank you.

LYDIA
 I liked your joke:
 “A private library is always hanging by a hair,
 Which is ironic because he didn’t have any.”

STAN
 (A little chagrined.)
 Yea. I practiced my talking points...
 I didn’t think you’d be at the actual event.

LYDIA
 Ah. I thought I was your muse.

STAN
 You’re a-musing.

LYDIA
 How much did you drink?

STAN
 Enough.

Lydia pulls out a flask.

LYDIA
 Need more?

STAN
 Nice flask.

LYDIA
 It’s vintage.
 (He hesitates.)
 It’s hers. Was hers.

A moment. She throws it back. Beat.
 He takes it. Slams it back.

LYDIA
 I’d assumed you were a teetotaler.

STAN

Drinking is an essential part of our traditions.
I was so nervous.
I'm still nervous.

LYDIA

From their applause- that promotion's as good as in the hat.

STAN

Magic tricks. It could disappear.

LYDIA

You've got it. You've as good as got it.

STAN

I liked the way you listened. I noticed your recognitions when I said familiar things.
"Men and women are divine instruments. Build not a house of wor-worship, but a house of words and music..."

LYDIA

Now you're being full of it.

STAN

Sorry.

LYDIA

I like it.

STAN

"Love and support // those who create for they were truly made in..."

LYDIA

Can we see the box?

Stan points to it.

STAN

Right there.

LYDIA

I mean. See it.
(Stan freezes.)
How long do they keep it out?

STAN

Just tonight.

A moment.

STAN (cont.)

I didn't drink that much.
I should close up.

LYDIA

You're the one who brought it out, right? You've touched it?

Stan nods.

LYDIA

Was it heavy?

STAN

No. It's light. Like it's empty.

LYDIA

I bet it's not empty.
Did it make a sound? When you moved it?

STAN

Complete silence.

LYDIA

It'd be hard to tell. If it was letters. Old letters stuffed in there.
Let me touch it.

Beat.

STAN

Is that all this is about?

LYDIA

No.

A moment. Stan has unconsciously backed into the corner without the cameras.

STAN

Are you sure?

Lydia moves closer to him. And closer.

LYDIA

Let's touch it together.

He slides onto the ground.

Stan? Stan?

LYDIA

Hold on...

STAN

He stands.

Okay...

STAN

Stan reaches into his pocket. He pulls out a pair of gloves. He tosses her the gloves.

What's this?

LYDIA

The gauntlet.

STAN

He pulls tape out of his pocket. He covers a camera.

We have one minute.

STAN

No shit?

LYDIA
(Shocked he's letting her do this.)

This is out of compassion- because of your – [grandmother]

STAN

Thank you.

LYDIA

She puts on the gloves. He opens the glass case.
She picks up the box.

Avram always said, "History's far away, until it's in front of you."

STAN

She feels its edges.

It's locked. LYDIA

Obviously. STAN

There's a key, right? LYDIA

Stan doesn't answer.

C'mon, you know there's a key. LYDIA

You think we'd store them together? STAN

You know where it is. LYDIA

Maybe. STAN

You know where everything is. LYDIA

They hold the box together.

You think there'd be an inscription. LYDIA

There aren't... words for this. STAN

She shakes it. Slightly.

See empty? STAN

I think I heard something. LYDIA

It's his soul. STAN

No. Listen.
Fluttering?
Hear that?

LYDIA

That's um...

STAN

(He points to his heart. Beating.)

Time's up.

LYDIA

Wow.
Everything feels very - [intense].

STAN

I know, right?

Stan puts the box away. He uncovers the camera.
They stand in silence. Weirdly turned on by the
intensity. Stan moves back to the corner.

STAN

There are moments one wants to be alone.

LYDIA

This isn't one of them?

He shakes his head.

STAN

No ma'am.

She moves next to him. She removes her glove and
touches his heart. He removes his – and touches her
hair.

She starts to kiss him on the lips.

STAN

Oh, Jesus.

LYDIA

We can stop.

STAN

I can...selectively put some of my values aside.

Not live by his words?
 LYDIA
 Live by some of his words.
 STAN
 Maybe he did that too.
 LYDIA
 Shhh...
 (He kisses her again.)
 Walls. Ears.
 STAN
 Tongue.
 (She kisses him.)
 What do my lips taste like?
 LYDIA
 Parchment.
 I'm kidding.
 Chapped.
 STAN
 Sorry.
 LYDIA
 It's okay. I...like it.
 STAN
 They kiss. They kiss deeply. They kiss like they're
 reading each other's lips with their lips.
 LYDIA
 What do you think of when you touch yourself?
 He stops.
 LYDIA
 Do you think of future partners or the past?
 STAN
 I...don't.
 LYDIA
 You don't what?

A moment.

LYDIA (cont.)

You're lying. C'mon, don't be so repressed.

STAN

Future.

LYDIA

Really?

STAN

I'm more attracted to future possibilities than the past.

(Beat.)

Also, there weren't...really...many past...

LYDIA

Nuh-uh. You were serious?

STAN

I've spent my life in these archives.

(A moment.)

What would they catalogue of you?

LYDIA

Unpaid bills.

Essays. A lot of essays on English topics.

Three dead laptops. I can't bring myself to throw them out.

Bad poems mostly based on bad dates with townies in Bangor, Maine.

A hairbrush.

What about you?

STAN

My toothbrush.

A moment.

LYDIA

Think the archives could use this dress?

STAN

Right now?

LYDIA

It dates back to the 50s. She says she danced with him in it.

STAN

It's an archival library. Not a vintage shop.

(Stan moves away.)

Maybe...you should. Go.

I understand.

If this...

(He points to the box.)

Is all this is about.

LYDIA

Hey. Dance with me.

STAN

Okay.

He moves to the corner.

LYDIA

Would dancing get you in trouble?

STAN

No. But it's embarrassing.

Lydia steps closer to him and into the corner.
He suddenly kisses her.

STAN

Shit. I shouldn't have –

She kisses him back while he's talking. It's awkward.

LYDIA

You said there were other women.

STAN

One. When I was younger...Once. But we – didn't...

LYDIA

I mean—other women claiming to be an heir.

STAN

Let's just keep –

He keeps kissing her.

LYDIA
 Is the library silencing them?

STAN
 Libraries are all about silence.
 “Shhh....we’re in the library.”

LYDIA
 I mean- are they silencing people- with accusations – against Abraham?

STAN
 He’s innocent.

LYDIA
 Why are you so sure?

STAN
 Let armies step forward.

LYDIA
 Have they—accused him of anything? Other than illicit affairs?

STAN
 Like what?

Lydia grabs his hand – she moves it over her
 breasts. He jerks back.

LYDIA
 You don’t like –

STAN
 Sorry. I wasn’t—[ready]...

LYDIA
 You don’t want to?

STAN
 Sorry.

He takes a moment.

STAN
 Hold on.
 May I?

Please.

LYDIA

He does. It's getting heavier.

LYDIA

I'm not the only one?

STAN

I thought if you heard- at the gala.

LYDIA

About how great he was?

STAN

I thought.
How many people are invested. You would feel it. See it.
Respect it.

She moves his hand into her dress.

STAN

What are you—?

LYDIA

Trying to steal back my life a little.
A lot.
(A moment.)
So, I'm not the only one?
Doesn't it make it more likely true? If other people...A lot of people have...

STAN

No. That makes it a shared delusion.
My own mother knew him. We stayed with him. Never once did I see him touch her.
What are you—?

LYDIA

I want to wrestle. Fight me.
I want to get into a fight I can't win.

Stan plays along. She guides him to pin her against
the wall.

LYDIA

I want to know.

I know.

STAN

I want to know.

LYDIA

I've looked.

STAN

A moment.

STAN

In the box. I've looked.

LYDIA

You're lying.

He keeps kissing her.

STAN

God.

LYDIA

Have you really looked?

STAN

It's empty.
It's a Dybbuk.
It's a puzzle.

LYDIA

Wrestle with me.
(He pins her against the wall.)
I didn't realize this place was sooo...endowed.
I'm kidding. Not about –

STAN

Let's just—

LYDIA

Okay.
Push me down.

Stan awkwardly half-pushes her. She remains standing.

Again. Harder.
I'm asking you to.

LYDIA

He does. She pulls him onto the ground on top of her.

Pin me.
Say – "I'm Abraham."

LYDIA

What are you doing? This is *really*...

STAN

Fucked? Say "I'm Abraham."

LYDIA

Don't...

STAN

Say- "I'm Abraham."

LYDIA

He's still in the throes of it.

"I'm...Abraham."
(He's getting into it.)
I'm Abraham. I'm Abraham.

STAN

Say: knowledge is self-knowledge.

LYDIA

"Knowledge is...
Knowledge is...
Knowledge is...
Is..
Is...Is..."

STAN

Stan is crying while kissing her. They've fully crossed the line into having sex. It's weird and freaky and they're both, despite the complexity of it – liberated. Lydia's life support buzzer rings. She freezes.

Stop.

LYDIA

It's really hard for him. But he does.
She makes a decision.

LYDIA

No. Don't stop.

STAN

Okay. I'm not playing that game.

It buzzes louder. Vibrates on the floor. Buzzkill.

LYDIA

Sorry.

She pulls herself together. Races to it.

STAN

What's going on?

LYDIA

It's my...grandma. I have to...

STAN

Oh, shit.

LYDIA

I have to—

STAN

Are you sober? Are you driving?

LYDIA

No. Yes. Driving.
Shit.

STAN

I'll come with you.
I've only had one.
I'm more sober.

LYDIA

It's not far. I can...

Shit. I've got to shut this place down.

STAN

Stan begins closing up shop. A moment.

You're okay?

STAN

Lydia races towards the door.

Fine.

LYDIA

A moment. Stan realizes.

I thought you said she was dead!!!

STAN

It's urgent.

LYDIA

Lydia hurries out the door. Stan looks around at the space. He races after her.

Wait!

STAN

Blackout.

Box 6: Life Alert II

The same night. Stella's home.
Stella lies on the floor, unresponsive.

LYDIA

Grandma?!
Grandma?

Stella coughs.

LYDIA

Oh, Jesus.

After several beats.

STELLA

About time.

LYDIA

Did you push the red button?

STELLA

Peggy, where have you been?

LYDIA

Lydia.

STELLA

Off on a drug run, Peggy?

LYDIA

Is there an ambulance on the way?

Do you need—?

(Realizing.)

We don't need one.

We don't need one.

(A moment.)

Are you hurt?

A knock on the door. Lydia checks Stella over.

STAN

Hello?!

LYDIA
 We don't need an ambulance!!!
 (She realizes it's Stan.)
 Oh, Jesus.

Stella sits up.

LYDIA
 Sitting up. Okay that's good.

STAN
 Hello!? I'm sorry I followed. But...
 No. I'm not. Hello?! You shouldn't have been driving.
 I don't know what's going on in your world that—
 Jesus. I think it might rain.

Lydia moves towards the door.

STELLA
 Don't let him in.

Stella slowly stands. Lydia realizes.

LYDIA
 You're not hurt.

Stella matter-of-factly brushes herself off and sits
 on the chair.

STELLA
 Don't let him in.

STAN
 I can't stay long. And I don't know why you lied. But I've—
 Alright. Have to check for leaks. Going now. I'm going. Now I'm going.

LYDIA
 You're not hurt at all. Did you—?
 Did you just push the button to—?
 Did you actually fall?

STAN
 I know you're in there. So um—Yeah. Going.

STELLA
 DON'T OPEN THE DOOR.

It's been a weird night.
Definitely going to rain.

STAN

Lydia opens the door.

Hello.

STAN

Stella stares out, stricken.

She lied. She's fine. Want to meet a liar?

LYDIA

Stan awkwardly steps in.

Hi. You must be...

STAN

Stella.

LYDIA

Stella. Nice to meet you...

STAN

Stella stares at him in shock. He is dressed exactly like Abraham.

A...
Abraham?

STELLA

No. Sorry. Stan.
Miss...Stella. I've heard a lot about you.

STAN

Abe, have you come for me?

STELLA

Stan. Just Stan.

STAN

She did it to get my attention.
Because she's a liar. An old, bone-thin liar.

LYDIA

She's the liar? She's alive.
(Freaked out.)
I'm glad... everything's alright then.

STAN

Stella moves closer to Stan.

Abe?

STELLA

It's not Abraham, Grandma.

LYDIA

Stan realizes. He removes his hat.

I was a bad mother, Abe. But you were a worse father.

STELLA

See? Hair? Just a balding dude.

STAN

Abe's face.

STELLA

Sorry. Stan.
Hi. I'm Stan.

STAN

That's Abe's face.

STELLA

Okay. This is getting—[weird].

LYDIA

Abe, I'm not sure she grew up okay.

STELLA

She's just acting this way because you're dressed like him. She hasn't seen a man for—

LYDIA

Well, I'm glad all is well.
The rain's going to start shortly. I can feel it – so...

STAN

Stella grabs Stan's shirt. And his hands.

STELLA

That's Abe's face! And his hands.
(She looks him in the eyes.)

And his eyes.
His eyes.

A moment. Stella holds him. Stan goes along with it.

LYDIA

Grandma.

STAN

Fine. It's...fine.

Suddenly Stella violently hits him.

STELLA

How dare you. HOW DARE YOU.

Lydia looks closer at Stan. She moves to one of Abraham's books and looks at the picture of Abraham. She looks at Stan. She freezes.

LYDIA

Has...has anybody ever told you...You look like him?

STAN

Sometimes. But it's – a lot of us of the fold. You know- well, we kind of – Have similar attributes- you know?

LYDIA

No. She's right. Your eyes look like his.
Your lips too. Exactly like his.
Who did you say your dad was?

STAN

Not Abraham.
He just – we stayed with him a while. When my mom momentarily left my—

LYDIA

And you never thought...

STAN

No. Of course not. It's going to pour.

Stan starts moving towards the door. Realizing.

LYDIA

Oh my God.

STAN

It's not. That's not possible.
You're not related to him. I'm not related to him.
NOBODY is related to him.

LYDIA

Just his words, right? They're only related as followers of his word?

STAN

She's crazy. This is crazy.
(The sound of rain pouring.)
I've got to—
The water. – [To] make sure the leaks are sealed.
I've got to...

Stella watches him leave. She calmly sits. Lydia stands—terror stricken.

LYDIA

No.
Were you lying about Abraham?
(Stella is silent.)
I hope you were lying.
You can rot in hell for lying.

Stella sits back vacantly.

STELLA

Sit with me?

A moment. Lydia doesn't sit with her.

STELLA

The truth is in the box.

Box 7: The Truth

The sound of rain.
 The atrium. Stan covers the security cameras.
 He stands over the box. He puts on gloves.
 He lifts it.
 A knock. He jumps.

LYDIA

STAN. Let me in.

Stan doesn't answer.

LYDIA

Stan!!?

Lydia enters from the backdoor.
 She's soaked.

LYDIA

The backdoor was—

STAN

(Realizing.)
 I must've—[left it unlocked].
 Everything's sealed. It's all sealed.

Lydia notices him over the box.

LYDIA

Were you—?
 You were going to—?

STAN

I'm putting it away.

LYDIA

Oh.
 (A moment. She notices the security cameras are covered.)
 Why are the security cameras covered, Stan?
 (She notices a small key in his hand.)

Is that—?

STAN

None of it's true.

LYDIA

Then why are you standing there with the key?

(A moment.)

Because you know—

STAN

Because I know none of it's true.

LYDIA

Stan...

STAN

This one time I was with my family. And Abraham was there.
 And I—I was maybe seven. We were in this park. And there was this field of yellow flowers.
 Whatever they were. Goldenrod, I think. An entire field of goldenrod and ragweed.
 And nobody seems to be seeing this incredible yellow field. But Avram. He's looking at it.
 We're in this field of goldenrod. Just standing there. Watching it.
 And every time- every time somebody appreciates him, they're standing there with us.
 In that field with me. Seeing it.
 And right now, Lydia. Those flowers are rotten. They died. And I smell them.
 And I smell like them.
 Like a lie. There's this smell on my body.
 Like I desecrated something.

(A moment.)

When we—

That was my first.

LYDIA

Stan...are you okay?

She moves towards him. She stops. Sickened for a moment.

STAN

If we open it?

You'll know, right? That he's pure. That the proof of his purity is in there.

That there's purity in this world. And he was pure.

(He moves towards the box. He stands for a long time with the key. He stops.)

No.

He can't do it.

He hands her the key.

STAN

You do it.

Okay.

LYDIA

Lydia takes the key. She moves towards the box.
She stops like she's hit by an invisible force field.

LYDIA

My God.

My God.

My guts.

Something in my...gut.

(A moment.)

Stella's senile. Even if she screams to the last the truth is in the box. I don't have to listen.

She's senile. That's all. A crazy woman, okay? She's crazy.

What's this going to get us?

Living the rest of my life knowing that we—

I've given enough.

I've given enough.

I've given.

What's the truth going to get us? A class action lawsuit? Shitty notoriety. And living with the fact you and I—you and I—

I don't. I don't want to know.

I don't want to know.

(A moment.)

I have to... [go]. I'm sorry. For good.

Lydia starts to exit. She stops.

STAN

You'll...come back?

Lydia shakes her head.

LYDIA

It's...for the better.

STAN

It's not a big town.

LYDIA

Don't come near me. Promise me you won't knock on our door.

STAN

You know where I live.

A moment. They both know she's not coming back.
Ever.

LYDIA

Take it to the basement.
Let me see you take it to the basement.

Stan picks up the box. He stops.

STAN

You should just go.
GO.
There are times one wants to be alone.

LYDIA

Alright.
I'm going now.

She stays standing. Finally, she starts to leave.
They have the impulse to hug each other but can't.

LYDIA

Bye.

STAN

(Pretending to tip a hat.)

Farewell.

She doesn't move. He doesn't move.
Lydia starts to back further away.
She exits swiftly.

STAN

Careful – the rain.

Stan follows after her a few feet. He stops.
The sound of the door shutting.
The sound of howling wind and rain.
Stan is alone.
He carefully lifts the box. He moves towards the
entrance to the backroom. He stops.
He doublechecks the cameras.
He takes out the key.
Slowly, carefully – he unlocks the box.

A moment. As he opens it – the lid pops open on its own. A whirling rush of wind as if a universe is impossibly rushing from the box into the library. Hundreds of letters fly out. The screams of dozens of women fill the theater. Haunting, broken screams. Angry, hurt, and wailing. A chorus of mixed voices. Not just Stella's.

The screams are painful to hear like out of tune violin chords, deafening.

Stan screams with them.

A moment.

Stan covers his ears.

A moment. He gathers the envelopes swiftly. He doesn't look at them.

He throws them back into the box.

Quickly he shuts it.

All is silent.

A very long silence. Stan locks the box. With the shut box, he begins to move towards the entrance to the backroom. Right before he exits—

Lydia reenters. A moment.

LYDIA

I heard.
I heard.
I heard.

Stan and Lydia look at one another.

Blackout. End of play.