

Family story

By Kira Obolensky

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SET: A table, big enough to hold a suitcase and some objects and behind that, a rocking chair. The actor who is not speaking sits in the chair.

OBJECTS: The objects in the play are somewhat abstract—they are, in essence, meant to be the physicalization of different memories, and so they should feel and look that way. A shell-like object, for example, will be recognizable as something out of the ordinary—it will both resemble a large shell and also be its own unique object. The objects change during the course of the play. In the first half the objects are wrapped and placed in the suitcase. In the second half of the play, the objects are unwrapped. When we see them for the second time, there is a slight change in the object. This is achieved by having two sets of objects in the case.

CHARACTERS:

This play is for two people, presumably from different generations within the same family. There could be an age difference between the two performers, but I can also see it without such a difference, as the play takes place in two different time frames. While the gender specified in this version is female that can be changed according to performers—it could be a play for two men, or for a man and a woman. The gender specifications should be changed, in that case. The first person who packs the suitcase does so with an urgency perhaps inspired by the sense of an upcoming departure. The suitcase, while filled with objects is not necessarily real—the objects are memories that shift through time; the suitcase the story to contain the memories. The second person, who unwraps the suitcase, is moved by the urgency of trying to remember something that can't quite be remembered properly.

(suitcase is open on the table. Objects are set off to the side on another table in the order in which they go in to the suitcase)

VOICE ONE (Alice Tindi):

This is going to be a mystery, do you hear me are you listening do you have your brain turned on loud and clear? This is gonna be a mystery... a flat out, full-tilt conflagration of missing pieces. Later, and I mean much later, it will disappear all together. It's only going to stay alive as long as people are willing to tell this story. I'm packing it up now for inspection later. Girl, I ask you to turn your face my way and stop being so dense so flat so entirely uninterested, because this mystery is being wrapped up now in some kind of family story that you will want to unpack for someone else at a later date.

That is not to say I am the keeper of the family mystery, no I am merely a contributor along the way one of the voices that you will absolutely be guaranteed wish you had listened to earlier.

(pick up shell and study it. Make visible to audience)

This is the oldest story in our collection and it has to do with the sea. Your great grandmother Pearl loved the ocean and before she came here she was in a country so beautiful no one can completely describe it. Or maybe someone could describe it and we've just forgotten how. She called it...well, I can't quite remember...something like The Faraway Country because it is in fact so distant from here. Your Great Grandmother Pearl lived in a hut spun from straw and this is, of course, legend.

(holds the shell up and tries to listen)

Pearl married Bronca, who was an oyster man. The house, the one built from straw? When the revolutionaries came the straw house burned. The revolution is forgotten because it was replaced quickly with another and soon no one could keep up with the revolutions anymore—all they knew was trouble, fear, the angry look on men's faces who are infected with an idea. Bronca died in Revolution number 32. Pearl fled to a city. I know she walked the streets her feet tired and sad with her two children, Isabelle and crazy Uncle Mike. Isabelle was my mother.

(she caresses the shell and carefully lays it on the table)

This is the family treasure. Are you listening to me? You look like you're thinking about a boy or what you're going to do later once I stop blathering on about so much dust.

If you put the family treasure to your ear and the time is right you might be able to hear a family secret or two...but most of the time it's the rush and whirl of the ocean.

(She picks up another object--it looks like a corn cob, something organic, beautiful and in a state of decay)

The family seed. It will be of use and interest to you eventually since it has grown so many...so much...of such variety and uniqueness. Consider your Uncle Mike. He says he's creative and I say he's a man who likes to burn down buildings.

My mother said that our family is a garden and we hope for bounty. Isabelle moved to Robbinsdale when she married Frank. You didn't know Frank. Frank died early in their marriage from an accident with a lawn mower. No dangerous revolutions. No men with boots. But a dangerous lawn mower.

(she folds a piece of paper with the family recipe on it)

This is a recipe for Nut Soup. I hated it when I was a kid. Just like you hate it now. But girl I'm here to tell you that if I could have one bowl of the soup the way my mother made it...I remember it was creamy and magenta in color with a tiny grit in it—from the nuts. She used almonds. I think she did. That's what I use anyway. Every time I make it something different happens with the texture. This is because I didn't pay attention in the same way you are not paying attention. That seems to be the family curse. We can't quite hold onto this recipe. I don't know if the recipe calls for beef. Or for beets. I put both in...well, good luck with the Nut Soup.

(she picks up a small handmade figure, a crude doll that is itself wrapped like a mummy.)

I'm putting this in for you. One day you'll want to know for certain you were a child. And you were loved. And this should do that. Add to the story, whatever it is.

(another object—a jar)

This is my contribution to the family story. I don't have revolutions or tragedies with lawnmowers, or even a green thumb. But I do have this. It's a jar filled with letters that I burned. Love letters to your father. I got embarrassed at the specifics, but in here is all the sentiment. This, my girl, is love.

(she begins wrapping all objects and putting them in the suitcase)

Live your life, my girl and don't hesitate. Tell your family this story and tell it as often as you can and then one day you're going to pass it on yourself. That's all I can say.

(She closes the suitcase and puts it in front of her daughter and exits)

(Voice two picks up suitcase and places it on the table with the green string on the top)

(The daughter is from another generation. She is professional, successful, and slightly harassed. She wipes her eyes with a handkerchief. Her son is now sitting in the chair. He is 17 and playing with a cell phone.)

I miss my mother. I think of her on this day every year because this is the day when she left to a place some people call heaven and I just call faraway. I haven't looked in here in awhile. And now you're old enough, I thought we'd do it together.

Will you get off that phone, son? I'm getting frightened for your thumbs, they're moving so fast I fear for the joints.

My mother called this suitcase the family story and she said everyone in the family puts a little something in and soon we got us a great epic worthy of HBO. Everything goes in...but not all of it comes out.

(She opens the suitcase and takes a minute looking inside. What she sees moves her.)

It's just as I remembered.

(she takes out the recipe)

Nut Soup. God I hated Nut Soup, I can see her face perched over a bowl, hopeful that it would taste better than it smelled. I can barely read the handwriting now...smudged and old.

She used...peanuts I think

And what's this...beets. Yeah, it had lots of beets in it. That's what made it red.

Did the soup have meat in it?

I'll have to try it both ways.

She made this soup on the day I graduated from high school. She could not have been prouder. She told me—child, you are going to rule the world. And while I'm not ruling the world, it's pretty close don't you think?

I mean I am Empress of the Neighborhood. And the Owner of my Own Business. And the Boss of my Kitchen.

That was a joke to see if you were paying attention.

I'm going to make this soup tonight. Beets? Or Beef? I'm pretty certain it was....

Peanuts. Or almonds? Why didn't she write it down? She just says "nuts."

(slight pause, trying to remember)

Well, nuts.

(she takes out the cob. IT looks slightly different than when we saw it in the first half of the play. it's slightly different, maybe smaller)

(she holds it up and tries to listen to it)

I remember she said to listen to the family treasure and you will hear it sing. Except I can't hear a thing.

(she puts it to her mouth like a microphone)

I have no idea what this is supposed to be...is this a corn cob? My mother told me something about my Uncle Mike. He died last year. He sold used cars. He was an...interesting guy. A bit unpredictable. A bit, how to say this politely?, A felon. He had some issues with his behavior. No one knows why. Just Uncle Mike. My mother was holding this and telling me I'm supposed to pass it on to you. Which I will. Along with psoriasis, a tendency to exaggerate and a laugh that is really too loud. I'll put it in the case and when I'm gone, you go ahead and sort it out. Just remember that in here somewhere is a family treasure. This may be it, but I feel certain it's not going to make you rich.

(she takes out the dust)

I'm struggling with this dust. I'm becoming slightly afraid that this is not dust but ashes. Oh my word. This is your great grandfather, Bronca! She said, I put this in here so you remember...that life is short and we all turn to ash. Love, too. She was a firm believer in that. My mother said this is a reminder of all the love she had for ... My father. He was a very quiet man and he had his own stories but no one thought they were important and so we've forgotten most of them entirely. They got eaten up by my mother's stories. He was a quiet lovely man, and I see him in your gentle nature.

(she peers in the jar)

Wait a minute...now, this is a jar filled with burned love letters! How can I forget that.? Burned because...I'm not exactly sure. But I can see my mother here with this case, wrapping each thing up like it was a precious object and I was listening. I mean, I was pretending to listen. Just like you are.

Do you have any questions?

(silence)

(she gets another object in the case)

(the shell)

This comes from the Old Country. Where your people come from. It was a war-torn place near the sea. There was a woman there, she was related to you —your great great grandmother. Her name was...uh, what was it? Pearl. Her name was Pearl. She lived in a straw house until it was burned in the Revolution. She loved the sea. This was her treasure. That's right. I remember now. I always wanted to touch this when I was little. But when I did, my hand got slapped. Child, my mother would say, that's precious! One day I wrapped it up in cloth and put it in my baby carriage and pushed it around the neighborhood. That is a day I will never forget. My mother was old-fashioned and did not hesitate to correct my transgression. Made me want to touch it even more! If you put it to your ear...

(she does)

It opens up another world—the vast and magnificent place your ancestors came from.

(She takes out the wrapped mummy.)

Oh that's funny she put this in here into the family story, because it's not like Mr. Waddle plays an important role...but it was a summer and my dad didn't have a job. She didn't have one either. We were eating a lot of this weird squash she grew and mashed up. No Nut Soup that summer. And I wanted this toy, I said to her that if I didn't get it I

would not be able to function. I can't even remember what I wanted. Something made out of plastic, most likely. So my dad carved this weird creature out of wood and my mother wrapped it up like a mummy. Look how it moves. Mr. Waddle. Why'd she put that in there...? The night my father made him, I remember the way he kissed the top of my head and my mother held my hand.... I loved Mr. Waddle. She put Mr. Waddle in here and she was laughing when she did. Mr. Waddle reminds me that you don't need too much to have some fun.

Of course, you're going to have to remember all of this. I hope you do a better job of it than me.

(son gets up to help wrap objects and put them in the suitcase)

And now I'm going to put something in, because that's how it works. Everyone puts something in for the next batch of children. I'm going to put in my bank account because I am very proud that I have raised you by myself and did such a good job. I am going to put in a house key, so you know you always have a place to come home to. I'm going to wrap it up—

(she does)

And put it in here. For later. You'll unwrap it and you'll ponder this key and you'll think—what the hell does this open?

And maybe, just maybe you'll remember.

(she closes the suitcase and leaves it...end of play)