

TITLE: LOVED ONES OF LOVED ONES

A Stage Play

by

David A. Miller

Grief has a second circle.

After the sudden loss of a woman who connected many lives, her family and closest confidants discover that grief doesn't belong to one person—it spreads, reshapes relationships, and reveals how love truly endures.

Copyright (c) 2025 This screenplay may not be used or reproduced for any purpose including educational purposes without the expressed written permission of the author.

david.miller@david.millerscreenwriter.com

479-282-4161

<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm10766305/>

ACT I

SCENE 1

A living room.

Not staged for mourning.

Not rearranged.

Just paused.

Morning light through a window.

A chair slightly pulled out from the table.

A sweater folded over the back of the sofa.

A coffee cup on a coaster, half a ring of dried liquid beneath it.

A clock ticks somewhere in the house.

Louder than it should be.

Thomas Carter, early 60s, stands in the middle of the room.

He holds a set of keys.

He turns them over in his hand, metal against skin, listening to the faint clink.

He doesn't seem to know whether he's about to leave or has just arrived.

After a moment, he walks to the table, sets the keys down with unnecessary care.

He straightens the chair.

Adjusts the sweater on the back of the sofa.

He steps back, as if checking his work.

He sits.

He lasts three seconds.

Stands again.

He crosses toward the window, looks out without really seeing anything.

The clock ticks.

The front door OPENS.

Lucy Carter, early 30s, stands in the doorway with a small suitcase and a bag slung over her shoulder.

She takes in the room, then Thomas.

They look at each other.

Neither moves.

A beat that's just too long.

LUCY

Hey.

THOMAS

Hey.

Another beat.

Neither seems to know what the next gesture is supposed to be.

LUCY

I, uh... I'm here.

THOMAS

I see that.

They both realize how that sounded.

LUCY

Wow. Okay. Good start.

THOMAS

No, I meant—

I'm... glad you're here.

LUCY

That's better.

They move toward each other and embrace.

The hug is real, but careful, like they're both worried about breaking the other.

They separate a bit too soon, each stepping back as if they don't want to be the one still holding on.

THOMAS

How was the drive?

LUCY

Long.

Short.

Both. You know how that is?

THOMAS

You left this morning?

LUCY

Early. I couldn't sleep. I figured I might as well... be not sleeping in a moving vehicle.

THOMAS

Traffic?

LUCY

A little, around the city. Then it opened up.
It all sort of blurred together after a while.

She lets the bag slide from her shoulder.

Sets the suitcase down.

LUCY

It smells the same in here.

THOMAS

Does it?

LUCY

Yeah.

Like... dust and coffee and that... plant stuff she sprayed on everything.

THOMAS

Lavender.

LUCY

Right. Lavender.

And something else.

But that might just be... being here.

She looks around the room more intentionally now.

Nothing obvious has changed.

LUCY

It looks... exactly the same.

THOMAS

Yeah.

LUCY

Like you paused it.

THOMAS

I didn't...

I haven't-

I haven't really moved anything.

LUCY

On purpose?

THOMAS

I don't know.

I keep thinking I'll start with something small and then everything will come apart.

LUCY

So you just leave the chair half-pulled-out and the sweater there and the cup, and—

THOMAS

It seemed easier.

LUCY

It looks like she just stepped out of the room.

THOMAS

Yeah.

They stand in the weight of that.

LUCY

I can take the back room.

Unless you turned it into something.

THOMAS

No. It's the same.

You don't have to stay in the back room if you don't want to.

You could—

LUCY

The back room is fine.

I'll be close enough and far enough.

It's a good distance.

THOMAS

Okay.

A beat.

LUCY

Dad?

THOMAS

Yeah?

LUCY

How are you?

Thomas opens his mouth to answer.

Closes it.

Starts again.

THOMAS

I'm... fine.

Lucy lets that sit.

LUCY

Okay.

We're starting with lies then.

THOMAS

It's not-

I just don't have a better word than "fine" that doesn't sound like I'm reciting something or making it worse.

LUCY

You could try "awful."

Or "not okay."

Or "miserable."

Or "hollow," that's a good one.

"Completely disoriented" is nice.

THOMAS

I am... functioning.

I don't know what that falls under.

LUCY

That's... probably its own category.
Or maybe "all of the above."

They share something that almost resembles a half-smile.

Then it fades.

The clock ticks.

Blackout.

SCENE 2

Same living room.

Later that day.

The light has shifted.

Early afternoon.

Two coffee cups sit on the table.

They've clearly cooled.

Neither has been touched in a while.

Lucy is on the sofa, one leg tucked under her, holding her phone in both hands, looking at the screen without really seeing it.

Thomas stands near the window again, arms loosely crossed, like he's trying to hold his ribs in place.

LUCY

I went through Mom's—
Through her phone.
There are a lot of messages.

THOMAS

I know.

LUCY

People want directions.

Details.

Times.

They want to know what flowers to send and if there's a charity or if they should bring something to the house.

THOMAS

They want instructions.

LUCY

They want a list.

They want the right way to be sad.

THOMAS

Is there one?

LUCY

Apparently there's a right way to show it.

There might not be a right way to feel it.

A beat.

LUCY

Maria called.

Three times.

And texted.

She said she didn't want to show up if you needed... space.

THOMAS

She was your mother's oldest friend.

She doesn't need permission to come here.

LUCY

That's not what she asked.

She asked if you needed anything.

THOMAS

I don't know what that is.

LUCY

"Anything"?

THOMAS

What I need.

I don't have a list for that either.

Lucy watches him.

LUCY

You're very... composed.

THOMAS

Am I?

LUCY

Yes.

You are making a very convincing case for "fine."

THOMAS

I'm standing.

I'm answering questions about flowers and seating and whether or not there will be coffee after.

If that looks like composure, then I guess I'm composed.

LUCY

You're not crying.

THOMAS

Not right now.

LUCY

Have you?

THOMAS

Yes.

Not on a schedule.

But, yes.

Lucy takes that in.

LUCY

I thought you'd be... louder.

THOMAS

I'm not loud.

LUCY

You used to be.

You yelled at the TV.

You yelled in the car.

You yelled at the faucet that wouldn't stop dripping for three weeks.

THOMAS

That's different.

LUCY

How?

THOMAS

Those things... existed in a world where she was still here. I could afford volume.

That lands.

LUCY

She talked to me a lot at the end.

THOMAS

I know.

LUCY

About everything and nothing, and about whether I was eating properly, and whether you were resting, and whether the neighbors were still feeding that raccoon.

THOMAS

That raccoon is immortal.

LUCY

She said she was scared.

Once.

She said the word out loud.

THOMAS

She never said it to me.

LUCY

Maybe she didn't want to make it real for you.

THOMAS

It was already real.

LUCY

I know.

A pause.

LUCY

I don't want you to disappear into arrangements.
Into decisions about hymn numbers and sandwich trays and
which picture of her goes on the program.
I don't want you to vanish into logistics and call it "being
useful."

THOMAS

Someone has to pick the hymn numbers.

LUCY

It doesn't have to be you.

THOMAS

It's easier if it is.

LUCY

For who?

He struggles with that.

THOMAS

For me.

If I'm moving, I don't have to stop and... look at it.
Any of it.

If I stop moving, I don't know what happens.

Lucy softens, just a little.

LUCY

You sit.

You breathe.

Maybe you cry.

Maybe you don't, but at least you find out.

THOMAS

I don't...

I don't perform sadness on demand.

LUCY

I'm not asking you to perform it.

I'm asking you not to hide it like it's going to embarrass someone.

A beat.

THOMAS

I loved her.

LUCY

I know you did.

THOMAS

That's the only thing I feel certain I did right.

So if it doesn't look the way you expect, I...

I don't know what to tell you.

Lucy looks at him for a long moment.

LUCY

I'm not actually trying to judge you, Dad.

I'm just...

I'm scared that if you look this okay, she'll start to feel... like she was optional.

THOMAS

She was never optional.

LUCY

Then let that show up somewhere.
That's all I'm saying.

He takes that in, quietly.

LUCY

I don't know how to do this without her.

THOMAS

Neither do I.

He crosses to the sofa and sits beside her.

Not touching.

Close enough that he could, if either of them decided to.

The clock ticks.

They both hear it now.

Blackout.

SCENE 3 — ANNA ARRIVES

Same living room.

Later that afternoon.

The coffee cups are still there, a little more stale.

The light is getting thinner.

Lucy sits on the sofa, legs crossed, scrolling through her phone.

Not reading. Just moving her thumb.

Thomas stands behind the sofa, near the table where the keys still rest.

He looks like he's tried sitting and abandoned the attempt.

A knock at the door.

Gentle. Two short taps, then one more, like someone rehearsed not being intrusive.

Neither moves at first.

Another beat.

THOMAS

I'll get it.

He crosses to the door and opens it.

Anna Reed, late 50s, stands there with a paper bag in one arm and a reusable shopping bag in the other. She is dressed simply, nicely. She has clearly thought about not looking like she is trying too hard.

ANNA

Hi.

THOMAS

Hi.

They have a very brief, tiny exhale of shared relief that the other exists.

ANNA

I, um... I brought soup.

And some bread.

And there's fruit in here somewhere.

I couldn't remember if you were still...

If you were doing that thing where you're not supposed to eat bread.

THOMAS

That was...

That was a phase.

We can eat bread again.

ANNA

Good.

Grief without carbohydrates feels cruel.

He smiles.

It's small, but it's real.

THOMAS

Thank you.

You didn't have to—

ANNA

I know.

I wanted to.

And also, if I stayed at home another hour wondering if you had food in the house, I would've driven myself insane.

Thomas steps aside.

THOMAS

Come in.

Anna steps in carefully, like the house might object.

Lucy looks up from the sofa.

Their eyes meet.

ANNA

Hi, Lucy.

LUCY

Hi.

A beat of silence.

Anna sets the bags on the table, adjusting them so nothing spills.

ANNA

I can just leave this in the kitchen and get out of your way.

THOMAS

You don't have to rush.

LUCY

We were just sitting.

There's a lot of sitting happening.

ANNA

Sitting is work right now.

You get credit for that.

Lucy isn't sure whether to accept that or not.

LUCY

You, um...

You knew my mom pretty well.

Anna freezes for a fraction of a second, then relaxes.

ANNA

Yes.

I did.

I was... lucky.

Lucy nods slowly.

LUCY

I'm still deciding how I feel about that sentence.

ANNA

That's fair.

A small, honest smile from Lucy.

It flickers.

Anna takes a breath.

ANNA

I promise I didn't come to... take up her space.
Or yours.
Or his.
I just...
I needed to see that you were both... in the same room.
Still vertical.
Still breathing.

THOMAS

We're upright.

LUCY

There's been a lot of standing.

ANNA

Standing is a good start.

A pause.

LUCY

How did you... meet her?

ANNA

Your mom?
Through work first.
Then through everything else.
She had a way of... bleeding into the rest of your life whether
you planned for that or not.

LUCY

She didn't talk about you much.

Anna feels that.

Very gently.

ANNA

That sounds like her.
She didn't narrate every friendship out loud.
Some of them she just... kept.

LUCY

She narrated a lot of things.

ANNA

Not all of them.

But you were one of the things she narrated.
Extensively.

Lucy's defenses twitch.

LUCY

Oh, good.

I've always wanted to be a series.

ANNA

You were.

A long-running one.

Multiple seasons.

A tiny, involuntary laugh from Lucy, quickly contained.

LUCY

Did she...

Talk about me like I was... doing okay?

Or like I was one of her projects?

ANNA

She talked about you like you were her favorite thing she ever started and couldn't control.

She was both terrified and proud of that.

Lucy swallows that down.

LUCY

She didn't say that to me.

ANNA

She didn't say a lot of things to people's faces.
She outsourced some of that to... us.

LUCY

"Us"?

ANNA

The people she trusted to hold the things she couldn't quite say yet.

Lucy considers that.

Doesn't fully like it.

Doesn't fully reject it.

LUCY

Do you feel like you have to be here, Anna?

ANNA

No.

If anything, I keep wondering if I have the right to be here. I've stood outside this door twice today trying to decide if I should knock.

LUCY

And yet you decided yes.

ANNA

Eventually.

Mostly because I knew if I didn't, I'd make that about my comfort instead of your loss, and that felt... wrong.

A pause.

LUCY

There've been... a lot of people coming through here.

A lot of voices.

A lot of casseroles.

Everyone wants a moment so they can say they had a moment.

ANNA

I don't need a moment.

I just didn't want you to think I stayed away because this was too much.

You're can send me home if you want.
But I didn't want to send myself.

Lucy looks at her, trying to read her.

LUCY

You think she loved you?

Anna doesn't reach for modesty.

ANNA

Yes.
She did.
In her way.
And I loved her.
In mine.
And that's a lot.

LUCY

Okay. Whatever.

A beat.

LUCY

I just got back.
It's... strange to realize there are people who've been here
the whole time, who have... versions of her that don't include
me.

ANNA

That's a hard thing.
But it doesn't... cancel your version.
It just means she was bigger than one story.

Lucy's eyes sting; she blinks it away.

LUCY

I'm not ready to share her yet.

Anna nods, no argument.

ANNA

That's okay.
Sharing is not mandatory.
I can be... background for a while.

LUCY

I don't want you to disappear.

ANNA

I'm very practiced at disappearing.
Sometimes that's my first instinct.
But—
I also know she would've told me to come.
So I did.

She starts gathering her bags.

ANNA (CONT.)

I'll put the soup in the fridge.
There's labels, so you don't have to guess.
I even wrote "this one has too much garlic" on one of them in
case you want to avoid that.

THOMAS

Or aim for it.

ANNA

Or aim for it.
You get to choose.

She moves toward the kitchen, then stops and looks back at
Lucy.

ANNA

I am really, truly sorry you lost your mom, Lucy.
There aren't words big enough for that, but... I needed to say
it out loud.

Lucy nods, slow.

LUCY

Thank you.
For saying it.
And for coming.
And for... garlic.

Anna smiles at that.

ANNA

I'll check in tomorrow.
You don't have to answer.
I'll just send the words and you can catch up later.

She exits into the kitchen.

Lucy and Thomas are left in the living room.

LUCY

I guess she loved Mom too.

Thomas takes a breath.

THOMAS

Yes.
She did.

Lucy sits with that.

The clock ticks.

Blackout.

SCENE 4 — MARIA ARRIVES

Same living room.

Early evening now.

The light is dimmer; lamps are on.

The room feels a little more crowded with presence, even though it's still just them.

Lucy sits on the edge of the sofa, feet flat on the floor, elbows on her knees, staring at nothing in particular.

Thomas stands near the window again, but he's turned more into the room, like he might join it.

A knock at the door.

Firm. Rhythmic.

Someone who has never questioned their right to knock.

Thomas

That'll be Maria.

He crosses to the door and opens it.

Maria Klein, late 50s, enters with the ease of someone who has been coming through this door for decades. She wears no visible "funeral" expression; the emotion is deeper than that.

The second she sees Thomas, her face cracks.

MARIA

Oh, Thomas.

She steps in and pulls him into a hug before he can say anything.

This embrace is different—layered with years, fights, laughter, history.

MARIA (CONT.)

I am so, so sorry.

Thomas sinks into it for a moment, then pulls back.

THOMAS

Thank you for coming.

MARIA

Where else would I be?

She turns and sees Lucy.

Her eyes soften in a different way.

MARIA

Oh, Lucy.

Lucy stands.

Maria opens her arms.

Lucy steps into them and, for the first time, lets some of her weight go.

They hold on longer than anyone has so far.

MARIA (CONT.)

Let me look at you.

She pulls back just enough to see Lucy's face, still keeping her hands lightly on Lucy's arms.

MARIA (CONT.)

You're here.

Good.

I was going to come and drag you here if you weren't.

LUCY

I figured you might.

It seemed safer to just drive myself.

MARIA

That's usually the safer option with me.

They share a small, real smile.

MARIA

How are you?

Lucy almost says "fine."

Stops herself.

LUCY

I feel like someone took the floor out and neglected to tell me.

Is that an answer?

MARIA

It's an honest one.

I'll take it.

Maria looks around the room.

Takes in the unchanged objects, the careful arrangement.

MARIA (CONT.)

It feels... wrong.

Thomas reacts.

THOMAS

What's wrong?

MARIA

The quiet.

This room was never this quiet.

She hated silence.

She used to turn on the radio and then complain about the noise.

LUCY

She told me quiet made her feel like something was sneaking up on her.

MARIA

She told me quiet made her feel alone with her thoughts, which she did not trust.

They all almost laugh.

The sound catches.

THOMAS

I didn't know that part.

MARIA

She didn't tell you everything, Thomas.
That would've taken years you didn't have.

A beat.

MARIA

Has Anna been by?

Lucy stiffens, just a fraction.

LUCY

Yes.

THOMAS

She brought soup.

MARIA

Of course she did.

Lucy narrows her eyes slightly.

LUCY

Is that a good "of course" or a bad "of course"?

MARIA

Good.

Generally speaking.

Anna loved her too.

Sometimes in ways that made her uncomfortable.

LUCY

My mom or Anna?

MARIA

Both of them.

Your mom wasn't used to being... adored without being in charge of it.

Lucy lets that sink in.

LUCY

It feels weird.

Realizing there were all these versions of her walking around in other people's heads that I never met.

MARIA

She was very generous with herself.

And very stingy at the same time.

LUCY

That sounds like her.

MARIA

Everyone here is going to act like their version of her is the definitive one.

You included.

That's going to be a mess, and then it will settle.

Thomas sits for the first time in this scene.

THOMAS

I don't think Lucy wants to share her yet.

LUCY

Dad.

MARIA

Good.

You shouldn't have to.

Not yet.

Sharing is advanced-level grief.

You're still in the beginner's level.

Lucy almost smiles despite herself.

LUCY

I wish there was a syllabus.

MARIA

There's just reading the same feelings over and over and pretending they're new.

She sits too, as if the house just made room for her.

MARIA (CONT.)

What do you need?

Thomas and Lucy both stare at her like that's a foreign language.

LUCY

We don't know.

MARIA

That's OK.

Then start smaller.

What do you not need?

Lucy thinks.

LUCY

I don't want to explain her to anyone.

I don't want to stand there while people tell me stories about her like they're giving me homework.

I don't want to be polite when someone says, "She's in a better place," because that feels like a downgrade.

MARIA

Done.

I'll run interference.

I'll be the bad cop.

You can nod and leave the room.

I'll handle the small talk with the big feelings.

Thomas exhales, tension he didn't know he was storing.

THOMAS

Thank you.

MARIA

And you?
What don't you need?

Thomas thinks longer.

THOMAS

I don't want...
People looking at me like they're waiting for me to break in
a way they recognize.
I don't want... expectations waiting to be fulfilled.

MARIA

Good.
You're not up for a part.
You already had it.
You were cast thirty-five years ago.
You don't have to prove anything now.

A beat.

LUCY

What about you?

Maria looks at her.

LUCY (CONT.)

What don't you need?

Maria smiles, small and tired.

MARIA

I don't need anyone to tell me they know how I feel.
They don't.
They know how they feel, and they're going to dress it up in
my size.
I don't want to wear that.

Lucy nods slowly.

LUCY

I'm... glad you're here.

MARIA

Good.

I was coming either way, but it's nice to get the stamp of approval.

The clock ticks.

For the first time, it doesn't feel like the loudest thing in the room.

Lights fade.

SCENE 5 – MARIA AND THOMAS PRIVATE (EXPANDED)

Same living room.

Later that evening.

Lucy is offstage – we hear faint sounds in the distance: a drawer opening, footsteps overhead. She exists, but she's not in this conversation.

Maria sits on the sofa, one leg crossed over the other, hands resting loosely in her lap.

Thomas stands by the table again, a small stack of opened envelopes in front of him.

He picks one up, looks at it without really reading, sets it down, rearranges the stack, repeats.

MARIA

You know you can put those in a pile and ignore them until they start yelling at you.

THOMAS

They're already yelling.

Just with... letterhead.

MARIA

Then let them yell into a drawer.

You don't have to have a staring contest with the mail.

THOMAS

If I put them away, I'll forget they exist.
If I leave them here, I'll keep thinking I'm supposed to be
doing something about them.

MARIA

You're not supposed to be doing anything about anything for
at least a couple of weeks.

THOMAS

The world didn't receive that memo.

MARIA

The world rarely does.
It just keeps mailing things.
Forget about the world for a while.

He half-smiles, then sighs.

THOMAS

If my hands aren't doing something, I start to feel like I'm
going to unravel.

MARIA

You've always done that.
Your hands take over when your brain doesn't know where to
sit.

THOMAS

She used to say that.

MARIA

She did.
And then she'd put something in your hands so you didn't
start fixing the ceiling.

He lets that memory land.

THOMAS

Lucy thinks I'm... too intact.

MARIA

She told you that?

THOMAS

Not with those words.

She looks at me like I'm suspicious.

Like I'm not... devastated enough.

MARIA

Are you?

THOMAS

Devastated?

MARIA

Yes.

He answers without hesitation, but without volume.

THOMAS

Yes.

I am.

I just don't want to... display that in a way that satisfies whatever the standard is.

MARIA

There is no standard.

There is only whatever picture Lucy had in her head of what her father would look like when her mother died.

And you're not matching the drawing.

THOMAS

I don't know how to match something I haven't seen.

MARIA

You can't.

You shouldn't.

A beat.

MARIA (CONT.)

Grief is weird.

It makes people want to see themselves reflected in everyone else.

Lucy is trying to find her version of pain in your face, and it's not there, so she thinks maybe you're not in it.

THOMAS

That sounds... fair and unfair at the same time.

MARIA

It is.

Silence.

THOMAS

I loved her. I still do.

MARIA

I know.

THOMAS

I don't think I ever stopped loving her for even a day. Not in that... big dramatic way people talk about, just in the steady way.

Waking up and making coffee and knowing how she took it, and noticing when she changed it, and pretending not to notice when she changed it back.

I was... there.

MARIA

You were reliable.

You were her constant.

Thomas flinches very slightly.

THOMAS

Why does that sound like "just"?

MARIA

Because we've decided "reliable" isn't as romantic as "stormy."

But when someone is dying, I'll take reliable every time.

He lets that sink in.

THOMAS

Was it enough for her?

Maria doesn't sugarcoat, doesn't dramatize.

MARIA

Yes.

You were enough for her.

You were everything for her.

She didn't die thinking, "I wish I'd had a different husband."

She died thinking, "I hope he won't be alone in his head."

Thomas swallows.

THOMAS

She said that to Lucy.

MARIA

She said it to me.

And to the nurse that one night.

And probably to the mailman at some point.

She was very concerned about you, Thomas.

THOMAS

She never told me she was afraid.

MARIA

She told me.

THOMAS

Why?

MARIA

Because if she'd told you, it would've made it heavier on you. You were already carrying the doctors and the appointments and the pills and the "no, she can't have that much salt" conversations.

She didn't want to hand you anything else.

THOMAS

I would've taken it.

MARIA

I know. And she knew.

That's why she didn't give it to you.

He has to sit now.

He does.

THOMAS

Did she think I'd fall apart?

MARIA

She thought you'd try very hard not to.

And she was right.

Look at you.

You're alphabetizing grief.

A small, pained smile from Thomas.

THOMAS

Lucy thinks I'm failing some test.

MARIA

Lucy thinks everyone is failing some test.

Including herself.

That's how she keeps from admitting the test doesn't exist.

THOMAS

She's angry at Anna.

MARIA

Of course she is.

THOMAS

Anna doesn't deserve that.

MARIA

It's not about deserving.
Lucy is looking around for somewhere to put the part of this
that feels unfair.
Anna is a convenient surface.

THOMAS

There is no replacement.
For...
For her.

MARIA

No.
There isn't.
But Lucy doesn't know yet that grief isn't a game of musical
chairs.
She thinks if someone sits near you, they're sitting in her
mother's seat.

THOMAS

I don't want to compete with my own grief.
I don't want to stand in front of my daughter and demonstrate
sadness like it's a talent show.

MARIA

Then don't.
You'll always lose.
She'll always think she's sadder.
And in some ways, she might be.
But that doesn't mean yours counts any less.

A long, quiet moment.

THOMAS

Thank you for being here.

MARIA

You don't have to thank me.

THOMAS

I do.
The room feels... like it knows what to do when you're in it.

MARIA

That's only because I've spent years watching where she put everything.

I know which chair to sit in so I don't make things worse.

THOMAS

I don't know how to do this without her.

Maria leans forward, puts a hand briefly on his forearm.

Grounding, not pitying.

MARIA

You won't.

You'll do it with all the people she left orbiting around you.
Even when they're irritating.

Even when they're wrong.

That's the bad news and the good news at the same time.

Footsteps are heard faintly offstage.

Lucy moving somewhere else in the house.

Maria removes her hand.

The moment closes a little.

MARIA (CONT.)

I'll stay as long as you can stand me.
And when you can't, I'll still be down the street.

Thomas nods.

THOMAS

That sounds... like a plan she would've liked.

The clock ticks.

Lights fade.

SCENE 6 — ROBERT AND JOSH ARRIVE

Same living room.

Later that evening.

The house has settled into a quieter rhythm.

Not calm—just less reactive.

Thomas sits in a chair now, not the sofa.

Maria is nearby, flipping idly through a magazine she's already read.

Lucy enters from the hallway, holding a folded sweater she doesn't remember picking up.

A knock at the door.

Not tentative.

Not confident.

Somewhere in between.

Thomas looks up.

THOMAS

That might be—

MARIA

Robert.

Lucy stiffens.

LUCY

How do you know?

MARIA

Because he always knocks like he's apologizing for existing.

Thomas exhales and stands.

THOMAS

I'll get it.

He opens the door.

Robert Carter, early 60s, stands there with a jacket slung over his arm, keys in hand like he's not sure where to put them. He looks older than Thomas in a way that has nothing to do with age.

Beside him is Josh Carter, late 20s, hands in his pockets, taking everything in with quiet attention.

ROBERT

Hey.

THOMAS

Hey.

They hesitate–then shake hands.

A half-second too formal for brothers.

ROBERT

I, uh...

This is Josh.

JOSH

Hi.

THOMAS

Hi, Josh.

I'm–

I'm glad you could come.

Josh nods.

JOSH

Me too.

Robert steps inside, then stops, as if he's crossed a line he can't uncross.

ROBERT

Is this okay?

THOMAS

Yeah.

Of course.

Lucy appears behind Thomas.

Robert sees her and freezes slightly.

ROBERT

Lucy.

LUCY

Uncle Robert.

The distance in those two words is unmistakable.

ROBERT

I'm so sorry.

Lucy nods.

LUCY

Thank you.

Josh watches this exchange closely—not prying, just absorbing.

Maria stands.

MARIA

Robert.

She steps forward and hugs him before he can decide whether he wants it.

He stiffens, then lets it happen.

ROBERT

Maria.

MARIA

I'm glad you came.

ROBERT

I almost didn't. I wasn't sure if I should.

MARIA

I know.

Josh shifts his weight.

JOSH

I'm Josh.

I didn't—

I don't think we've met properly.

LUCY

We haven't.

They shake hands.

JOSH

I'm sorry.

About your mom.

Lucy studies him for a moment.

LUCY

Thank you.

Josh nods, unsure what else to say.

They all stand there for a beat, the room recalibrating again.

THOMAS

Sit, sit.

ROBERT

Sure. Thanks.

They sit—carefully, like people choosing seats on unfamiliar public transportation.

Josh sits slightly forward, elbows on his knees.

Robert leans back, arms crossed, already guarding.

ROBERT

I heard about...

About everything, obviously.

LUCY

Obviously.

ROBERT

I just—

I didn't know how fast you were... doing things.

LUCY

We're not doing much of anything.

Mostly we're standing and sitting.

ROBERT

Right. Right.

A beat.

ROBERT

She looks...

The house looks the same.

THOMAS

I haven't changed anything yet.

ROBERT

She liked it like this.

LUCY

Did she?

Robert bristles, just slightly.

ROBERT

She used to.

Maria watches this, alert.

MARIA

She liked knowing where things were.

She didn't like surprises in her own house.

Lucy absorbs that.

LUCY

That sounds about right.

Josh clears his throat.

JOSH

I don't remember her much.

I was young.

This lands unexpectedly.

LUCY

How old were you?

JOSH

Nine? Ten?

I remember her laugh more than her face.

Which feels... strange to admit.

Lucy softens.

LUCY

She had a good laugh.

JOSH

Yeah.

It made you feel like you'd done something right even if you hadn't.

Maria smiles.

MARIA

That's accurate.

Robert shifts, uncomfortable.

ROBERT

She could be... a lot.

Lucy looks at him.

LUCY

She could be a lot of what?

Robert chooses his words carefully.

ROBERT

Intense.

Invested.

Involved.

LUCY

Those are very polite words.

ROBERT

I'm trying to be respectful.

LUCY

She's dead, Uncle Robert.

You can use the real ones.

A pause.

ROBERT

She didn't let things go easily.

MARIA

Neither do you.

That cuts cleanly.

Robert exhales through his nose.

ROBERT

I guess that runs in the family.

THOMAS

We all have our specialties.

Josh looks between them, sensing something larger.

JOSH

I'm sorry if this is the wrong thing to say, but—
It feels strange grieving someone you didn't really know,
because everyone else did.

Lucy turns toward him.

LUCY

That's not the wrong thing to say.
We knew her and feel strange grieving too.

JOSH

It's like...
I'm borrowing everyone else's memories and trying to figure
out where I fit inside them.

Maria nods.

MARIA

That's exactly what you're doing.

Josh looks relieved.

JOSH

Okay.

Good.

Because I thought maybe I was just... being dramatic.

LUCY

Trust me.

There's plenty of drama already.

You're allowed your piece of it.

Robert watches his son, unsettled.

ROBERT

You didn't have to come, you know.

JOSH

I wanted to Dad.

ROBERT

You barely knew her.

JOSH

I know.

But you did.

And she mattered to you, even if you pretend she didn't.

That's the most direct thing Josh has said.

Robert stiffens.

ROBERT

I'm not pretending.

MARIA

You aren't?

Silence.

Robert looks at the floor.

ROBERT

I didn't always know how to be around her.

LUCY

She noticed.

Robert looks up.

LUCY (CONT.)

She still loved you.

Robert swallows.

ROBERT

I don't know what to do with that.

Maria leans forward.

MARIA

You don't have to do anything with it tonight.

Thomas finally speaks, gently.

THOMAS

You're here.

That's enough for now.

Robert nods.

Josh looks around the room again—this time with less distance.

JOSH

She really held a lot of people together, didn't she?

Lucy answers before anyone else can.

LUCY

Yes.

Maria adds, quietly.

MARIA

And now everyone's trying to figure out where to stand.

The clock ticks.

For a moment, no one moves.

Lights fade.

ACT II

SCENE 1

The same living room.

Later that evening.

The furniture has shifted slightly.

Chairs pulled closer.

A few extra seats that don't quite match.

Plates, glasses, half-finished food.

Evidence of people coming and going.

Muted conversation overlaps as lights rise.

LUCY, THOMAS, MARIA, ANNA, ROBERT, and JOSH are present.

Others may be implied offstage.

The energy is careful but crowded.

Everyone is trying to behave.

MARIA

(to the room)

There's coffee if anyone wants it.

It's not good coffee, but it's coffee.

ANNA

I'll take bad coffee.

I think that's where I am emotionally.

A few soft, uneasy laughs.

ROBERT

I didn't know she drank it this strong.

LUCY

She didn't.

She just made it that way for other people and then complained about it.

MARIA

She liked knowing she'd survive something everyone else found unpleasant.

THOMAS

She said it built character.

ROBERT

Did it?

THOMAS

I'm still undecided.

A pause.

JOSH

The service was... nice.

LUCY

That's the word people keep using.

JOSH

I mean—

I don't know what the right word is.

MARIA

There isn't one.

"Nice" is what people say when they don't want to be specific.

ANNA

It felt very her.

LUCY

How?

ANNA

It didn't rush.
It didn't explain itself.
And it ended before anyone was ready.

Lucy considers that.

LUCY

Okay.
That's fair.

ROBERT

She would've hated all the standing.

MARIA

She hated ceremonies that asked her to perform gratitude.

ROBERT

She still believed in them.

MARIA

Yes.
And complained the whole time.

A beat.

ROBERT

I keep thinking I'll hear her voice.
Like she's just in the other room waiting for everyone to leave.

THOMAS

I keep expecting her to ask why there are so many chairs out.

ANNA

She'd already know.
She always knew.

Lucy stiffens slightly.

LUCY

What do you mean?

ANNA

I just-

She had a way of tracking the room.
Noticing who was quiet.
Who was hovering.
Who needed to be told to sit down.

LUCY

She didn't do that for everyone.

ANNA

No.

She did it selectively.

Silence creeps in.

MARIA

(to redirect)

Does anyone want more bread?

JOSH

I do.

If that's okay.

MARIA

Of course it is.

Nothing in this house requires permission tonight.

Josh takes bread.

JOSH

It's strange.

Everyone keeps telling stories about her, and I feel like I'm collecting them instead of remembering.

LUCY

That's because you didn't have time.

JOSH

Yeah.

But I still feel like I lost something.
Even if I never had it.

MARIA

That counts.

ROBERT

Does it?

MARIA

Yes.

It does.

ROBERT

I don't know.
Grief used to feel more... earned.

LUCY

You don't earn it.
It gets dumped on you.

ROBERT

I didn't say it didn't happen.
I just said...

MARIA

You're uncomfortable because it isn't behaving the way you expect.

ROBERT

I'm uncomfortable because everyone's acting like they knew her best.

A charged silence.

ANNA

No one knew her best.

All eyes turn to Anna.

ANNA (CONT'D)

I don't mean that defensively.

I mean—

She wasn't built that way.

LUCY

She was my mother.

ANNA

I know.

LUCY

That's not just one version.

ANNA

No.

It's a central one.

But it's not the only one.

THOMAS

Let's not—

MARIA

No.

Let's.

MARIA (CONT'D)

This is the part where everyone realizes they loved a different woman.

ROBERT

That feels... uncomfortable.

MARIA

It should.

JOSH

So what happens now?

LUCY

Now?

JOSH

Yeah.

When the service is over.

When people stop bringing food.

When the chairs go back where they were.

THOMAS

We'll figure it out.

JOSH

Together?

THOMAS

I think so.

MARIA

Whether we want to or not.

The room absorbs that.

ANNA

I should probably head out.

LUCY

You don't have to.

ANNA

I know.

I just don't want to be the reason anyone stops saying what they mean.

Lucy meets her eyes.

LUCY

That's already happening.

A small, unexpected smile between them.

The clock ticks.

No one moves to stop it.

Lights fade.

SCENE 2

The same living room.

Later that night.

Some guests have gone.

The plates are stacked.

Glasses sit abandoned in clusters.

The room feels used.

Not messy – just lived through.

MARIA and LUCY are near the table.

THOMAS sits off to one side.

ROBERT and JOSH are near the window.

ANNA stands, half-ready to leave.

A knock at the door.

Not hesitant.

Not loud.

Measured.

MARIA

That'll be Lane.

She says it without emotion.

Just information.

THOMAS

Do you want me to—

MARIA

I've got it.

She crosses to the door and opens it.

LANE KLEIN (early 60s) stands there.

Calm. Grounded. Careful.

He carries nothing.

No food. No flowers.

LANE

Hi.

MARIA

Hi.

They kiss – brief, familiar, restrained.

LANE

I came as soon as I could.

MARIA

I know.

She steps aside.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Everyone's still here.

LANE

I figured.

Lane enters.

The room subtly adjusts.

LANE

Thomas.

THOMAS

Lane.

They shake hands.

Firm. Respectful.

LANE

I'm sorry.

THOMAS

Thank you.

Lane turns to Lucy.

LANE

Lucy.

LUCY

Lane.

They embrace.

Shorter than Maria's.

Still sincere.

LANE

I wish I'd known what to say today.

LUCY

No one did.

LANE

That helps.

Lane nods toward Robert and Josh.

LANE (CONT'D)

Robert.

ROBERT

Lane.

LANE

Josh.

JOSH

Hi.

LANE

Hi.

A beat.

LANE

I didn't bring anything.

MARIA

Good.

LANE

I wasn't sure if that was rude.

MARIA

It's perfect.

Lane takes in the room.

The chairs.

The tension.

LANE

Looks like she gathered everyone one last time.

LUCY

She would've liked that idea.

LANE

She always did enjoy a roomful of
people who didn't realize they were
connected yet.

That lands differently from Anna.

ANNA

She was good at that.

Lane looks at Anna for the first time.

A brief flicker of recognition.

LANE

Yes.

She was.

A pause.

LANE (CONT'D)

You must be Anna.

ANNA

I am.

LANE

I'm Lane, Maria's husband.

ANNA

I know.

They shake hands.

Polite.

Neutral.

Not cold.

LANE

I'm glad you came.

ANNA

Thank you.

LANE

She mattered to you.

ANNA

Yes.

She did.

Lane nods.

No challenge.

No apology.

LANE

That seems to be the theme.

Silence.

MARIA

Lane had to work late.

LANE

I left as soon as I could.

MARIA

I know.

LANE

I watched the service online. It was very nice.

LUCY

You can do that?

LANE

Apparently.

I learned that today.

MARIA

You didn't miss much.

LANE

I did.

I missed being in the room.

That's pointed.

But gentle.

MARIA

It's been... a lot.

LANE

I can see that.

Lane sets his jacket over a chair.

He does not sit yet.

LANE (CONT'D)

Did she tell stories?

MARIA

Of course she did.

LANE

Everyone's?

MARIA

Everyone's.

LANE

That tracks.

A beat.

LANE (CONT'D)

Did she tell any of mine?

MARIA

Not yet.

LANE

Okay.

That "okay" holds weight.

ANNA

I should probably go.

MARIA

You don't have to.

ANNA

I know.

But it feels like a good moment to... create space.

Lane looks at Anna.

Considers.

LANE

You're welcome to stay.

ANNA

Thank you.

I'm going to head out anyway.

She turns to Lucy.

ANNA (CONT'D)

I'll check in tomorrow.

LUCY

Okay.

Anna turns to Lane.

ANNA

It was nice to meet you.

LANE

You too.

Anna exits.

The door closes.

Something shifts.

LANE

She loved her.

MARIA

Yes.

LANE

And she loved you.

MARIA

Yes.

LANE

Those things don't cancel each other out.

MARIA

No.

They don't.

LANE

But they do create... overlap.

MARIA

Lane—

LANE

I'm not accusing.

I'm naming.

Silence thickens.

LANE (CONT'D)

I watched you today.

Everyone watched you.

You were very good at it.

MARIA

At what?

LANE

Holding everyone.

MARIA

Someone had to.

LANE

I know.

I married someone who always steps in.

That lands.

LANE (CONT'D)

I just want to know where I stand in all of this.

MARIA

You're here.

LANE

That's not what I meant.

LANE

That's not what I meant.

ROBERT

Maybe this isn't-

MARIA

It's fine.

LANE

I'm not angry.

I'm... displaced.

LUCY

By my mom?

LANE

No.

By the version of her that still lives in my house.

Maria absorbs that.

MARIA

She was my best friend.

LANE

I know.

MARIA

That didn't change our marriage.

LANE

It didn't change it.

But it sure did shape it.

A beat.

LANE (CONT'D)

I'm not asking you to choose.

I'm asking you to see me.

Maria looks at him.

Really looks.

MARIA

I do see you.

LANE

Then say it.

MARIA

You are my husband.

LANE

And?

MARIA

And she was my person.

The room stills.

THOMAS

I think—

LANE

No.

Let her finish.

MARIA

Those things coexisted.

They didn't compete.

LANE

They competed in me.

Silence.

JOSH

I don't think anyone ever talks about how many people you can love deeply without meaning to hurt someone.

Everyone turns to him.

JOSH (CONT'D)

It feels like the quietest kind of damage.

Lane nods.

LANE

Yes.

MARIA

I never meant—

LANE

I know.

MARIA

I didn't realize-

LANE

I know.

A beat.

LANE (CONT'D)

I just didn't want her to die and still be the third person in my marriage.

That lands fully.

MARIA

I'm sorry.

LANE

Thank you.

Silence.

LUCY

This is what she did.

MARIA

What?

LUCY

She made people tell the truth by standing still long enough.

THOMAS

She would've hated this part.

MARIA

Yes.

LANE

And secretly loved it.

A small, shared breath of agreement.

The clock ticks.

Lights fade.

SCENE 2 - GROUP FRACTURE - ALLIANCES BEGIN TO SHIFT

The living room, later that night.

Most of the food has been cleared, but not all of it.

Plates stacked unevenly.

Glasses half-full, half-forgotten.

The room no longer feels unified.

People are standing in different clusters without realizing it.

Maria and Lane sit close, but not touching.

Lucy stands near the bookshelf, arms crossed loosely, listening more than speaking.

Thomas is seated off to one side, watching everyone like he's tracking weather.

Robert stands near the window.

Josh hovers between spaces, unintentionally central.

A silence stretches too long.

Maria is the first to speak, almost to fill space rather than intention.

MARIA

She used to say that gatherings reached a point where everyone should either tell the truth or leave.

She never specified how to tell when that moment arrived.

LANE

I think we passed it about twenty minutes ago.

A faint, uneasy laugh from Josh.

Lucy doesn't laugh.

LUCY

I don't know what truth people are supposed to be telling.
I feel like everyone keeps circling the same idea and
pretending it's different each time.

ROBERT

That's because no one wants to say the wrong thing.

LUCY

Or the real thing.

Robert turns to her.

ROBERT

You think those are different?

Lucy considers that.

LUCY

I think "wrong" is usually just code for "uncomfortable."

ROBERT

Uncomfortable isn't always productive. Nor is it always wrong.

MARIA

Neither is silence.

Lane shifts slightly.

LANE

There are different kinds of silence.

THOMAS

There are also different kinds of talking.
Some of them don't actually move anything forward.

Josh clears his throat, then stops himself, then speaks anyway.

JOSH

I feel like—

And you can tell me if this is out of line—
But it feels like everyone is trying to protect a different
version of her.

Lucy looks at him sharply.

LUCY

I'm not protecting a version.
I'm protecting my mother.

JOSH

I know.

I didn't mean it like—

I just meant that every time someone says "she was this way,"
someone else reacts like that erases something.

MARIA

Sometimes it does.

LANE

Or it feels like it might.

Lucy turns to Maria.

LUCY

Did you ever feel like she was different with me than with
you?

Maria doesn't answer immediately.

MARIA

Yes.

Lucy waits.

MARIA (CONT.)

But not in the way you're bracing for.

LUCY

Then how?

MARIA

She didn't need you the way she needed me.
And she didn't need me the way she needed you.

Lucy frowns.

LUCY

That sounds like a riddle.

MARIA

It's not meant to be comforting.

LUCY

I don't want comforting.
I want to know if I was...
If I was just one version of her life or if-

LANE

Lucy—

LUCY

No, I'm serious.
Everyone keeps talking like she belonged to everyone equally,
and I don't know what to do with that.

ROBERT

She didn't belong to anyone.

Lucy snaps toward him.

LUCY

She was my mother.

ROBERT

And my sister.

LUCY

That's not the same thing.

ROBERT

No.

It isn't.

But it doesn't mean I didn't lose her too.

LUCY

You barely spoke to her.

That lands hard.

Robert stiffens.

ROBERT

That doesn't mean I didn't think about her.

LUCY

Thinking about someone and being there for them are not the same thing.

MARIA

Lucy—

LUCY

No.

This matters.

Thomas finally speaks, carefully.

THOMAS

We're not going to rank closeness.

LUCY

Why not?

Everyone else seems to be.

LANE

I don't think anyone's trying to rank it.

I think we're trying to explain it without hurting each other.

LUCY

Well, it's not working.

A beat.

Josh steps forward without meaning to.

JOSH

Can I say something stupid?

MARIA

Those are often the most useful things.

JOSH

I don't feel like I lost her.

I feel like I lost... the way everyone else talks about her. Like there was this shared language I never learned, and now the class is over.

Lucy softens despite herself.

LUCY

That's not stupid.

JOSH

Okay.

Because it feels like I'm grieving the outline of something instead of the thing itself.

LANE

That's still grief.

ROBERT

Is it?

Lane turns to Robert.

LANE

Yes.

It is.

Robert bristles.

ROBERT

It's just that it sounds like you're turning grief into... entitlement.

Lucy reacts.

LUCY

You think I feel entitled?

ROBERT

I think you're afraid of being displaced.

Lucy laughs, sharp.

LUCY

Of course I am.

My mother died.

ROBERT

That's not what I meant.

LUCY

Then say what you mean.

Robert struggles.

ROBERT

I mean-

I mean she was the person who always held the family in place. And now she's gone, and suddenly everyone's arguing about where they stand, and-

MARIA

And that makes you uncomfortable.

ROBERT

Yes.

MARIA

Because it requires participation.

That stings.

ROBERT

I came, didn't I?

LUCY

You arrived.

Silence drops fast.

Thomas stands.

THOMAS

Enough.

Everyone looks at him.

This is rare.

THOMAS (CONT.)

We are not going to turn this into a courtroom.
No one is on trial for how they loved her.

LUCY

It feels like they are.

Thomas turns to her, softer.

THOMAS

I know.

But love doesn't come as guilt or innocence.

Lane nods slightly.

LANE

That's the problem.

Everyone wants proof now that she's gone.

Maria exhales.

MARIA

She would've hated this conversation.

LUCY

She would've started it.

That lands.

Maria smiles sadly.

MARIA

Yes.

She would have.

A beat.

LANE

I think the fracture isn't about her.

I think it's about what happens when the person who made room for everyone isn't here to do it anymore.

Josh nods.

JOSH

So now we're all bumping into each other.

LUCY

And blaming each other for taking up space.

Thomas sits again, tired.

THOMAS

She used to say that grief doesn't shrink people.

It expands them.

And that's why it feels unbearable at first.

Lucy looks at him, surprised.

LUCY

She said that to you?

THOMAS

Once.

At the kitchen table.

I didn't understand it then.

LUCY

Do you now?

THOMAS

I think I'm starting to.

A silence—not hostile, but unsettled.

People shift.

Not physically—emotionally.

Alliances are no longer where they were at the start of the evening.

The clock ticks.

No one comments on it.

Lights slowly fade.

SCENE 3 – MARIA TELLS A STORY SHE SHOULDN'T

Same living room.

Later still.

The fracture from before hasn't healed; it's just settled into new fault lines.

People are quieter now, but not calmer.

Maria stands near the table, holding a glass she hasn't touched.

Lane sits, watching her—not suspicious, but attentive in the way long marriages learn.

Lucy remains standing, arms loose at her sides, guarded but open.

Thomas sits with his hands folded.

Robert has moved farther toward the window.

Josh is seated on the floor, back against the sofa, accidentally centered again.

Silence stretches.

Maria breaks it, almost conversationally.

MARIA

She once told me that if she ever died first, she wanted the room afterward to feel like this.

Everyone looks at her.

LUCY

Like... what?

MARIA

Unsettled.

A little uncomfortable.

Like people were standing in the wrong places.

Lucy frowns.

LUCY

That doesn't sound like her.

Maria smiles faintly.

MARIA

It does to me.

Lane shifts slightly.

LANE

Maria—

MARIA

No, it's true.

I'm just remembering.

She pauses, measuring the room.

MARIA (CONT.)

She said grief shouldn't let people keep pretending.
That it should... rearrange things.

Lucy stiffens.

LUCY

Rearrange what?

Maria takes a breath.

This is the moment she could stop.

She doesn't.

MARIA

The stories people tell themselves about where they stand.

Lane knows now.

He doesn't interrupt-yet.

THOMAS

WHAT KIND OF STORIES?

Maria looks at Thomas, then at Lucy.

MARIA

The ones where love is neat.

Hierarchical.

Earned by proximity or paperwork.

Lucy's jaw tightens.

LUCY

Are you saying—

MARIA

I'm saying she worried that when she was gone, people would rush to define her in ways that made themselves feel better.

Silence thickens.

ROBERT

That feels... unfair.

MARIA

It probably is.

She wasn't gentle about this topic.

But that was her.

Josh looks up.

JOSH

She talked about this?

Like... ahead of time?

MARIA

Yes.

More than once.

Lucy's voice is steady, but tight.

LUCY

What exactly did she say?

Maria hesitates now—not out of doubt, but out of awareness.

MARIA

She said that the most painful thing wouldn't be dying.

It would be watching—if she could—how people closed ranks afterward.

LANE

Maria.

MARIA

She said she hoped it would be messy.

Because mess meant people were finally telling the truth.

Lucy takes a step closer.

LUCY

Did she talk that way about me?

That lands hard.

Maria meets her eyes.

MARIA

Yes.

Lucy swallows.

LUCY

What did she say?

Lane stands now—not to stop her, but to be present.

MARIA

She said you would try to make her smaller so you could keep her.

Lucy's breath catches.

LUCY

That's not—

Maria

I know.

I told her that too.

LUCY

Then why are you telling me this?

Maria answers honestly.

MARIA

Because she asked me to—

If the moment ever came where you thought loving her meant owning her.

The room goes very still.

THOMAS

Maria.

MARIA

She was afraid you'd feel crowded out by people who loved her differently.

And that you'd respond by building walls instead of windows.

Lucy's eyes shine—not with tears yet, but pressure.

LUCY

She never said any of this to me.

MARIA

She didn't want to burden you with it.

She wanted you to grieve freely, not defensively.

LANE

And you think this is helping?

Maria turns to him.

MARIA

I think it's honest. And I think it's already happening.

Lane exhales.

LANE

You're not wrong.

But you are... choosing a moment.

MARIA

I am.

Josh speaks softly.

JOSH

This feels like one of those things that changes how everyone remembers the last few years.

Maria nods.

MARIA

It probably does.

Robert finally speaks, voice edged.

ROBERT

Why would she say all this to you?

Maria doesn't flinch.

MARIA

Because I listened without trying to correct her.

That lands.

LUCY

So what—

She made you the keeper of her... real thoughts?

MARIA

No.

She made me the keeper of the ones she wasn't ready to give out yet.

Lucy laughs quietly, sharply.

LUCY

That's convenient.

MARIA

It's heavy.

Lane steps closer to Maria now.

LANE

You're not wrong.

But you are crossing a line.

Maria looks at him.

MARIA

Which one?

LANE

The one where her voice starts replacing the people still alive.

A silence.

That hits.

THOMAS

I think Lane's right.

Lucy turns to Thomas.

LUCY

You too?

THOMAS

I think...

I think Evelyn trusted all of us with different parts of herself.

And none of us get to assemble the full picture alone.

Maria absorbs that.

MARIA

I'm not trying to assemble it.

LUCY

Then what are you trying to do?

Maria answers quietly.

MARIA

I'm trying to stop you from shrinking her to survive this.

Lucy's voice breaks just slightly.

LUCY

I don't know how else to survive.

That lands harder than anything so far.

A long silence.

Lane steps in—not as a husband defending territory, but as someone widening the room.

LANE

Maybe the problem isn't the story.

Maybe it's that it came without consent.

Maria nods.

MARIA

That's fair.

Lucy looks at Maria—really looks.

LUCY

I don't want her lessons right now.

I want my mother.

Maria's eyes soften completely.

MARIA

I know.

Josh speaks, tentative.

JOSH

I think...

I think she trusted you because you'd say the things people didn't want to hear.

But maybe she didn't mean for it to be said like this.

Maria exhales.

That lands exactly where it should.

MARIA

You might be right.

The energy in the room shifts—not resolution, but recalibration.

Lucy steps back.

LUCY

I need some air.

She moves toward the hallway.

Thomas half-stands, then stops.

THOMAS

Take your time.

Lucy exits.

Silence remains, heavy but changed.

Lane turns to Maria.

LANE

We'll talk later.

Not angry.

Not forgiving.

Just inevitable.

Maria nods.

MARIA

Yeah.

Robert stares out the window.

ROBERT

She always did this.

Dropped truth like a glass and left everyone else to deal with the shards.

Josh looks at him.

JOSH

Maybe that was her way of trusting people not to walk away.

No one answers.

The clock ticks.

This time, it feels accusatory.

Lights fade slowly.

SCENE 4 - ROBERT / JOSH — FRACTURE OR REPAIR

A side room or the edge of the living room.

Later that night.

The house has gone quieter.

Not empty—just thinned.

Robert stands by the window, looking out into the dark.

Josh lingers nearby, unsure whether this is a conversation he's allowed to enter or one he's already in.

Neither speaks for a moment.

Josh breaks first.

JOSH

I didn't mean to say that thing earlier.

About... her trusting people not to walk away.

Robert doesn't turn.

ROBERT

Yes, you did.

Josh shifts.

JOSH

Okay.

I did.

But I didn't mean it as an accusation.

ROBERT

Everything sounds like an accusation when it lands where it already hurts.

Josh nods, accepting that.

JOSH

I don't know how to talk about her.

About Aunt Evelyn.

Everyone else seems to have rules, and I feel like I keep breaking them.

ROBERT

That's because you didn't grow up with her.

You didn't learn the choreography.

Josh considers that.

JOSH

Was there choreography?

ROBERT

Oh, yes.

Where to stand.

When to speak.

When to let her take the floor and when to let her believe she'd already won.

Josh smiles faintly.

JOSH

That sounds... exhausting.

ROBERT

It was.

And somehow, she made it feel like love.

A beat.

Josh leans against the wall.

JOSH

You don't talk about her like someone you miss.

Robert finally turns.

ROBERT

That's because missing her implies I wanted more of her in my life than I let myself have.

Josh doesn't retreat.

JOSH

Did you?

Robert exhales through his nose.

ROBERT

I wanted less of the... intensity.

Less of the way she looked at you like she already knew what you were going to say and was disappointed you hadn't said something better.

Josh nods slowly.

JOSH

She did that to me once.

At Christmas.

I spilled something.

She didn't say a word—just looked at me like I'd revealed my entire character.

Robert almost laughs.

ROBERT

Yes.

That look.

Silence.

JOSH

I think she was trying to connect.

ROBERT

I think she didn't know how not to lead.

Josh watches him carefully.

JOSH

You sound angry.

ROBERT

I am.

At her.

At myself.

At the fact that she's gone and now everyone wants me to produce some... appropriate emotion on demand.

Josh sits on the arm of a chair.

JOSH

No one asked you to cry.

ROBERT

They asked me to care the right way.

JOSH

Did you?

Robert hesitates.

ROBERT

I cared in the way I knew how.

Which was... at a distance.

It was easiest to just stay away.

Josh nods.

JOSH

That's kind of your thing.

Robert bristles-then stops.

ROBERT

Is it?

JOSH

Yeah.

You don't hover.

You don't crowd.

You don't ask questions unless you already know the answer.

You give people space and call it respect.

Robert looks at his son.

ROBERT

That's not a compliment.

JOSH

I didn't say it was an insult either. It's simply an observation.

A beat.

JOSH (CONT.)

I think she scared you a little.

Robert considers this longer.

ROBERT

She did.

Because she wanted things.

Out loud.

From people.

And I've spent my life trying not to want things loudly.

Josh nods.

JOSH

I think that's what Mom used to say.

Robert stiffens.

ROBERT

Your mother didn't say that.

JOSH

She did.

Not often.

But sometimes.

Usually after you left the room.

That lands carefully.

ROBERT

And what did she say?

JOSH

That you loved deeply but quietly.

And that sometimes quiet love feels like absence to the people standing closest to it.

Robert sits.

That hits.

ROBERT

Did it feel like absence to you?

Josh doesn't rush this.

JOSH

Sometimes.

Not always.

But enough that I learned how not to need things from you. Which... I don't think was the lesson you were going for.

Robert looks at him—really looks.

ROBERT

I thought I was giving you freedom.

JOSH

You were.

But you were also giving me practice at being alone.

Silence settles between them.

Not hostile.

Heavy.

ROBERT

I didn't know how to be like her.

JOSH

You weren't supposed to be.

ROBERT

Then what was I supposed to be?

Josh answers simply.

JOSH

Present.

Robert nods.

That hurts, but it's clean.

ROBERT

I came tonight.

JOSH

You did. We did.

ROBERT

That counts for something.

JOSH

It does.

A pause.

JOSH (CONT.)

But it doesn't count for everything.

Robert accepts that.

ROBERT

I don't know how to fix this.

JOSH

I don't think it's a thing you fix.

I think it's a thing you notice.

And then... maybe do slightly differently next time.

Robert considers that.

ROBERT

There might not be many next times like this.

JOSH

There will be different ones.

Another silence.

ROBERT

I didn't mean to make you feel like grief was something you had to earn.

JOSH

I know.

ROBERT

And for what it's worth...

I'm glad you came.

I'm glad you said what you said, even if it made things... worse.

Josh smiles gently.

JOSH

I don't think it made things worse.
I think it just made them louder.

Robert nods.

ROBERT

She would've liked you.

Josh looks at him.

JOSH

I know.

That lands as both confidence and longing.

They sit together—not touching, but closer than before.

Not repaired.

But no longer fractured in the same way.

The house settles around them.

The silence after Josh's last line has lengthened.

Not awkward—weighted.

Robert sits forward now, elbows on his knees, hands clasped.

Josh watches him, then speaks carefully, like he's stepping onto thin ice.

JOSH

Can I ask you something hypothetical?

Robert doesn't look up.

ROBERT

I don't usually like hypotheticals.

JOSH

I know.

That's why I'm asking.

Robert exhales, almost a laugh.

ROBERT

Okay.

Go ahead.

Josh hesitates longer than necessary.

JOSH

What if the tables were turned?

Robert looks up now.

ROBERT

Turned how?

JOSH

What if she were still alive...

And I had died?

The room seems to contract.

Robert's first instinct is deflection.

ROBERT

That's not—

JOSH

I know it's not realistic.

That's not the point.

Just... stay with it for a second.

Robert sits back.

ROBERT

Okay.

Josh presses on, quietly relentless.

JOSH

What if I'd died young.
An accident.
Something sudden.
And she was still here.

Robert swallows.

ROBERT

I don't like this.

JOSH

I know.
But answer it anyway.

A long pause.

ROBERT

She would've been devastated.

JOSH

Yes.
But how?

Robert struggles.

ROBERT

She would've talked about you all the time.
She would've told stories.
She would've... kept you present.

JOSH

Present where?

ROBERT

Everywhere.
In conversations.
In memories.
In rooms you'd never been in.

Josh nods.

JOSH

And you?

Robert stiffens.

ROBERT

I would've—

I would've held it together.

Josh doesn't react.

JOSH

Would you?

ROBERT

I think so.

JOSH

Would you have talked about me?

Robert hesitates.

ROBERT

Yes.

Josh waits.

JOSH

Out loud?

That lands.

Robert exhales slowly.

ROBERT

Not the way she would've.

JOSH

Would you have corrected her stories?

Robert frowns.

ROBERT

What do you mean?

JOSH

If she said I was brave.
Or generous.
Or complicated.
Would you have said, "Well, not always"?

Robert closes his eyes briefly.

ROBERT

Probably.

JOSH

Would you have done it to keep things accurate...
Or to keep them manageable?

That question hurts more.

ROBERT

I don't know.

Josh nods.

JOSH

I think that's the difference.
She would've let me get bigger after I was gone.
You would've tried to keep me contained.

Robert looks at him sharply.

ROBERT

That's not fair.

JOSH

I know.
But I think it's true.

Silence.

Robert speaks carefully now.

ROBERT

She felt things expansively.
I don't deny that.
But that doesn't mean my way is wrong.

JOSH

No.
It just means it lands differently.

A beat.

JOSH (CONT.)

If I had died,
I think you would've protected yourself by staying practical.
You would've remembered me in pieces you could hold without
breaking.

ROBERT

And that would've been wrong?

JOSH

No.
But it would've been lonely.

Robert absorbs that.

ROBERT

For who?

JOSH

For both of us.
Even if I wasn't here to feel it.

Another silence.

Josh softens, sensing he's gone far.

JOSH (CONT.)

I'm not saying you don't love deeply.

I'm saying...

I don't think you trust what happens when you let love be bigger than you can manage.

Robert stares at the floor.

ROBERT

Your aunt did.

JOSH

Yes.

ROBERT

And it exhausted her.

JOSH

It also connected her.

Robert nods reluctantly.

ROBERT

You think she would've loved you louder than I do.

Josh answers without hesitation.

JOSH

Yes.

Robert takes that hit.

ROBERT

And you think I should have been more like her.

JOSH

No.

I think you should have been more available to the possibility that people need different volumes at different times.

A beat.

ROBERT

If you had died...

I don't know if I would've survived that.

Josh looks at him.

JOSH

You would have.

ROBERT

How do you know?

JOSH

Because you survive everything by narrowing it until it fits inside you.

That's your gift.

And your limit.

Robert considers this.

ROBERT

And what would've happened to her?

JOSH

She would've broken open.

And then she would've made room for everyone else inside that break.

Robert nods slowly.

ROBERT

She always did that.

Josh shifts closer, gentler now.

JOSH

I don't need you to grieve like her.

I just need you to know that when you keep things small, sometimes it feels like you're keeping us small too.

Robert looks at his son—really looks.

ROBERT

I never wanted you to feel minimized.

JOSH

I know.

But intention isn't inheritance.

That line hangs.

Robert lets out a shaky breath.

ROBERT

I don't know how to change this overnight.

JOSH

I'm not asking you to.

I'm just asking you to notice when you start shrinking things out of fear.

ROBERT

Fear of what?

Josh answers quietly.

JOSH

Fear that if you let them be big, they'll break you.

Silence settles again.

Different now.

Robert nods once.

ROBERT

If the roles were reversed...

And you had died...

I think I would've needed her to teach me how to say your name out loud.

Josh's eyes sting.

JOSH

She would have.

Robert swallows.

ROBERT

I'm sorry I didn't learn that sooner.

Josh doesn't rush to comfort him.

JOSH

You're learning it now.

They sit together.

Still imperfect.

Still unresolved.

But something has shifted—from defense to awareness.

The house holds them.

Lights fade.

SCENE 5 – QUIET MORNING AFTER – WHAT SURVIVES THE NIGHT

Early morning.

The living room again, but altered.

Light through the windows is pale and honest.

Morning light doesn't flatter; it reveals.

The chairs are still out, but fewer people occupy them now.

A blanket draped over the back of the sofa where someone slept.

A mug in the sink that was never rinsed.

The house is tired.

Thomas is up first.

He stands at the counter, rinsing a coffee mug slowly, as if time has loosened its grip on him.

Lucy enters quietly from the hallway.

She's wearing yesterday's clothes, changed only in degree, not spirit.

They notice each other but don't immediately speak.

THOMAS

Morning.

LUCY

Morning.

A pause.

LUCY (CONT.)

Did you sleep?

THOMAS

Enough to stop pretending I wasn't tired.

Lucy nods.

She opens a cupboard, closes it, opens a different one.

LUCY

I forgot where things go.

THOMAS

They haven't moved.

LUCY

That might be the problem.

Thomas considers that.

He pours coffee into a mug, offers it to her without asking.

She takes it.

LUCY (CONT.)

It feels strange that the sun came up like it always does.

THOMAS

It usually does. Like George Harrison said, "Daylight is good at arriving at the right time."

LUCY

I know.

I just thought... maybe it would hesitate.

THOMAS

It never does that for anyone.

Lucy sips the coffee, grimaces.

LUCY

Still terrible.

THOMAS

She would be offended.

LUCY

She'd say it builds character.

They share a faint smile-real, but fragile.

A beat.

LUCY

I said things last night.

THOMAS

Everyone did.

LUCY

I don't know if I meant all of them.

THOMAS

You meant the feeling underneath them.

Lucy looks at him.

LUCY

Did you?

THOMAS

Yes.

That lands simply.

Footsteps from offstage.

Maria enters, hair undone, coat already on like she's half-leaving and half-staying.

She pauses when she sees Lucy.

MARIA

Good morning.

LUCY

Morning.

A beat-charged but quieter than before.

MARIA

I was just going to get some air before Lane wakes up.

LUCY

Okay.

Maria hesitates.

MARIA (CONT.)

I shouldn't have said everything I said last night.

Lucy studies her.

LUCY

I know.

Maria exhales.

MARIA

But I don't regret thinking it.

LUCY

I don't regret hearing it.
I just... wasn't ready for it.

MARIA

That's fair.

They stand there, neither yielding nor pressing.

LUCY (CONT.)

I don't want to lose her again by learning new versions of her too fast.

Maria nods.

MARIA

You won't.

They arrive slowly.

Whether you want them to or not.

A pause.

LUCY

I don't know where that leaves us.

MARIA

I think it leaves us... adjacent.
For now.

Lucy considers that, then nods.

LUCY

I can live with adjacent.

Maria gives a small, grateful smile.

She turns to Thomas.

MARIA

You okay?

THOMAS

I'm upright.

MARIA

That's something.

Maria moves toward the door.

MARIA (CONT.)

I'll be back.

LUCY

You don't have to—

MARIA

I want to.

She exits.

Silence returns, gentler this time.

From the hallway, Josh enters, rubbing his eyes, clearly having slept somewhere uncomfortable.

JOSH

Is it morning or just... less night?

LUCY

Morning won.

JOSH

Figures.

He pours himself coffee, tastes it.

JOSH (CONT.)

Wow.

That's... bold.

THOMAS

That's one word for it.

Josh leans against the counter.

JOSH

I don't think anyone won last night.

LUCY

I don't think anyone was trying to.

JOSH

That might've been the problem.

Lucy watches him.

LUCY

Are you okay?

Josh shrugs.

JOSH

I feel... clearer.

Which is uncomfortable, but manageable.

Thomas nods.

THOMAS

Clarity gives a hangover.

Josh smiles at that.

From the hallway, Lane enters quietly, already dressed, already composed.

He surveys the room without judgment.

LANE

Morning.

LUCY

Morning.

LANE

I'm going to head out in a bit.
Give the house some... space.

Lucy absorbs that.

LUCY

Thank you.

Lane meets her eyes.

LANE

For what it's worth—
I think she'd be proud of you.
Not for what you said.
For staying in the room afterward.

Lucy blinks, surprised.

LUCY

That doesn't feel like strength.

LANE

It rarely does from the inside.

A beat.

THOMAS

You're welcome anytime.

LANE

I know.

He turns to leave, then pauses.

LANE (CONT.)

She mattered to a lot of people.
That doesn't dilute what she was to you.

Lucy nods, slowly.

LUCY

I'm starting to understand that.

Lane exits.

The room settles again.

Josh finishes his coffee.

JOSH

So this is what survives the night?

Lucy looks around.

LUCY

I think so.

THOMAS

What's that?

Lucy answers without looking at him.

LUCY

The people who didn't leave.

A long, quiet beat.

The clock ticks.

But now, it feels... normal.

Lights fade.

SCENE 6 - THOMAS ALONE - THE WITNESS BECOMES SPEAKER

Late morning.

The house is mostly empty now.

Not abandoned, returned.

The living room has been reset, but imperfectly.

Chairs pushed back, not quite where they belong.

A blanket folded and left on the arm of the sofa, as if no one knew where else to put it.

Thomas stands alone.

He is holding a small object:

Evelyn's mug.

The chipped one she refused to throw away.

He turns it in his hands.

He does not speak at first.

He sets it on the table.

Then moves it an inch.

Then moves it back.

He exhales.

THOMAS

I watched you do this to people for thirty-five years.

A beat.

THOMAS (CONT.)

You never announced it.
You just... stood there.
Asked a question.

Waited longer than anyone expected.

He sits.

THOMAS (CONT.)

I thought my job was to give you somewhere to land after.
I thought that was love.
Being the place where things stopped moving.

He looks around the room.

THOMAS (CONT.)

And I was good at it.
I kept the lights on.
I paid attention to what broke and fixed it quietly.
I remembered which stories you liked told back to you and
which ones you didn't.

A pause.

THOMAS (CONT.)

I told myself that if I stayed steady enough, you wouldn't
need me to be anything else.

He picks up the mug again.

THOMAS (CONT.)

I see now that steadiness can look a lot like silence.
And silence... silence lets other people fill in the blanks.

He considers that.

THOMAS (CONT.)

They think I didn't feel as much.
Or that I felt it and didn't know what to do with it.
Or that I chose not to say it because I was afraid.

He shakes his head gently.

THOMAS (CONT.)

The truth is...

I didn't think it was mine to say out loud.

He looks toward the hallway—Lucy's direction.

THOMAS (CONT.)

You spoke so well for both of us.

For everyone.

You made space.

You made meaning.

A small, sad smile.

THOMAS (CONT.)

I thought if I started talking too, we'd drown in it.

He sets the mug down again.

THOMAS (CONT.)

I see now that what I called protection sometimes felt like absence.

He lets that sit.

THOMAS (CONT.)

I didn't want to compete with your gravity.

I didn't want to interrupt it.

I loved watching you be the center of rooms.

A beat.

THOMAS (CONT.)

But loving you quietly doesn't mean

I loved you less.

His voice steadies—not louder, just clearer.

THOMAS (CONT.)

I loved you in the mornings.

In the way I knew when you'd wake before you did.

In the way I kept track of your medicines without telling you
I was counting.

He smiles faintly.

THOMAS (CONT.)

I loved you in the pauses.

In the things that didn't need explaining.

A long silence.

THOMAS (CONT.)

They're all asking now where they stand with you.

Who you belonged to.

Who gets to speak for you.

He looks at the empty room.

THOMAS (CONT.)

You belonged to yourself.

That's what made you generous.

That's what made this so crowded after.

He stands.

THOMAS (CONT.)

If I could speak for you now—just once—I'd tell them this:

He stops himself.

Corrects.

THOMAS (CONT.)

No.

I won't speak for you.

He takes a breath.

THOMAS (CONT.)

I'll just speak for me.

A beat.

THOMAS (CONT.)

I'm still here.

I loved you completely.

And I'm learning—late, maybe—that loving quietly doesn't mean staying invisible.

He reaches for the mug one last time, then stops.

Leaves it where it is.

THOMAS (CONT.)

I'll try to let myself be seen now.

The clock ticks.

He doesn't react to it.

He exits the room slowly—not defeated, not resolved.

Present.

Lights fade.

SCENE 7 – EPILOGUE – ABSENCE MADE ORDINARY

Late afternoon.

The living room, once more.

It is cleaner now.

Not pristine—just lived back into.

The extra chairs are gone.

The blanket has been folded and put away.

The table is clear except for one mug.

Evelyn's mug.

Lucy enters carrying a small box.

Not ceremonial.

Just cardboard.

She sets it down on the table.

Thomas enters behind her, holding a grocery bag.

They move around each other easily now.

Not careful.

Accustomed.

THOMAS

I got the bread you like.
The kind with too many seeds.

LUCY

She hated that one.

THOMAS

She said it tasted like obligation.

Lucy smiles faintly.

LUCY

She wasn't wrong.

Thomas puts the groceries away.

Lucy opens the box.

Inside: a few photographs, folded notes, a scarf.

She takes out the scarf, holds it for a moment.

Not reverent.

Not afraid.

She folds it neatly and places it back in the box.

LUCY

I don't know where to put this yet.

THOMAS

It doesn't have to go anywhere today.

Lucy nods.

A beat.

LUCY

Maria texted.

THOMAS

How is she?

LUCY

Tired.

Relieved.

Still herself.

THOMAS

Lane?

LUCY

They're figuring it out.

Slowly.

On purpose.

Thomas nods.

LUCY (CONT.)

Josh sent a message too.

THOMAS

What did he say?

LUCY

That he finally understands why people talk about her like
she's still in the room.

Thomas looks around.

THOMAS

She sort of is.

Lucy considers that.

LUCY

Yeah.

Just... quieter.

They stand together for a moment.

No rush.

LUCY (CONT.)

I'm going back home tomorrow.

THOMAS

I figured.

LUCY

I'll come back.

Just not like this.

THOMAS

I hope not.

A small smile between them.

Lucy picks up the mug, studies the chip on the rim.

LUCY

Do you want to keep using this?

THOMAS

I think so.

Lucy nods.

She places it back where it was.

A beat.

LUCY

I was afraid that if things went back to normal, it would mean she didn't matter as much.

Thomas thinks.

THOMAS

I think it means she mattered enough to teach us how to keep going.

Lucy exhales.

LUCY

I don't feel finished.

THOMAS

I don't think you're supposed to.

They stand in the quiet.

The clock ticks.

Not loud.

Just there.

Lucy moves toward the door, stops.

LUCY

Dad?

THOMAS

Yeah?

LUCY

Thank you for staying.

Thomas looks at her.

THOMAS

Thank you for coming back.

They share a look—no conclusion in it, just connection.

Lucy exits.

Thomas remains.

He picks up the mug, rinses it, dries it, places it back on the shelf.

Not displayed.

Not hidden.

Just returned.

He turns off the light.

The room settles.

Lights fade.