

A BOX OF USELESS STUFF

by 3-8122

Characters:

Maureen -- 43, an astronaut

Ellen -- 17, Maureen and Tom's daughter

Juanita Forbes -- 30's or older, a NASA psychologist (offstage voice only)

Jackson -- 22, Maureen and Tom's son

Tom -- 39, a memory

Setting: the study in Maureen's home

Maureen's study: a desk with chair, another chair, and a bookshelf that holds a mix of books, knickknacks including an urn, and photos. MAUREEN sits alone at the desk. An empty metal box, approximately 4 x 9 x 3 inches, sits open in front of her. Also present on the desk are Maureen's cell phone and a rectangular, not cube-shaped, box of facial tissues. She contemplates the items on the shelf as the following speech is heard. Ideally this speech should be prerecorded, but if that is technically not possible, it can be delivered live.

MAUREEN (*prerecorded*): Mementos. Oh geez, what's the point? Do I really need an object to remind me of my husband or my kids? Juanita says that when we remember something, we're really just remembering the last time we called it up from memory, and that time was the memory of calling it up from before that, and on and on like an endless game of whisper down the lane. Just a little change here and there and you end up with a memory you'd swear to, except it never happened that way. (*She picks up a carved wooden box from the shelf.*) I remember buying this from a beach vendor in Grenada ... and Tom was sure we got it at an airport store on the way home. Each of us thought the other was just wrong. Who knows? We probably bought it at Walmart.

(*Sound of unseen outer door opening and closing*)

ELLEN (*off-stage*): Mom?

MAUREEN: In the study.

(*Ellen enters, gives Maureen a quick hug and flops down on the non-desk chair.*)

ELLEN: Hi, Mom. Whatcha doin'?

MAUREEN: Trying to pick out stuff for my PPK.

ELLEN: PPK?

MAUREEN: Personal Preference Kit. What I'm allowed to take along for my own comfort and enjoyment.

ELLEN: This box here? (*pointing to box on desk*)

MAUREEN: Uh-huh.

ELLEN: That's all you get?

MAUREEN: That's it. NASA's carefully calculated idea of how much room you need for your emotional stuff.

ELLEN: Look at this. (*Picks up the tissue box and drops it into the metal box, where it just fits.*) It's the size of a box of tissues.

MAUREEN: It's actually a tad bigger than the ISS crews get.

ELLEN: Well, they're just going to the space station, not all the way to fuckin' Mars.

MAUREEN: Ellen, if you want to get into the program, don't get in those habits. There's nothing in the criteria about swearing, but the reality is they're always judging you on everything.

ELLEN: (*Sighs*) And there's enough competition that if you don't play the game, there are a hundred others who will. I know. But I won't be applying for like another seven years.

MAUREEN: You shouldn't cuss around your mother, either. But I'm enjoying the chance to nag while I still can. It's one of the things I'll miss most. Did you have a tough day?

ELLEN: No, it was fine.

MAUREEN: You're always fine. I got lucky when I got you, kid. I listen to what some of my friends are dealing with and I think, "If I were them, I'd go to Mars and not come back."

ELLEN: Don't joke about that, Mom.

MAUREEN: What? Are you scared about this?

ELLEN: Well, it's only the farthest away, most dangerous trip anyone's ever made, and there are only about a million things that could go wrong, and if even *one* of them does ... hell yes, I'm scared. Aren't you?

MAUREEN: Not scared. I'm aware of the risks, but I'm willing to take them. It's the biggest adventure in history, and I've worked my whole life for it. Scared or not, I'm going. And I'm coming home. It'll be fine.

ELLEN: You're always fine. I got lucky when I got the smartest, bravest parents in the world.

MAUREEN: Yeah, but then *we* adopted you. Kidding! Seriously, your dad would be so proud of you.

ELLEN: I still miss him, Mom. Do you?

MAUREEN: He was my husband; I'll miss him for the rest of my life. Missing is how you love someone who's not here.

ELLEN: How cool would it have been for the two of you to go to Mars together?

MAUREEN: That was our plan.

ELLEN: They wouldn't have let you. Can't have both of a couple on one mission, right?

MAUREEN: We were hoping that rule would change by the time this mission came up. But you know, we even talked about getting divorced if it didn't.

ELLEN: Really? You wouldn't have done that, would you?

MAUREEN: We would never have split up. It would have been just to change our legal status.

ELLEN: Mom, I don't think NASA's that dumb.

MAUREEN: Anybody can be dumb when they want to be. And a lot of people wanted to see us make the trip together. But then the accident happened and ... that was that.

ELLEN: Yeah. So what are you taking for your kit? Books? Or chocolate and a tiny bottle of wine?

MAUREEN: Neither. We can load all the media we want on the computers, and they'd probably object to the wine. So, I don't know. Mementos, little luxuries. I've been trying to decide all afternoon.

ELLEN: If it were me, I'd take a diamond nail file and a couple bottles of kick-ass polish.

MAUREEN: That's really not a bad choice. Stuff like that can make a real psychological difference. Not for me, but maybe for you, someday. I've been trying to pick out one thing to remind me of each of you ... you, Jackson, and Dad. So what would you pick to represent you?

ELLEN: You mean, from this shelf or anything?

MAUREEN: Anything.

ELLEN: Hmm. Let me think.

MAUREEN: (*picking up same wooden box as during the opening speech*) Do you remember where we got this?

ELLEN: It's from the Grenada trip, isn't it? I think that's what Jackson won in the scavenger hunt at the resort. (*Maureen scoffs.*) No?

MAUREEN: Well, it's as good a memory as any. I remembered something totally different, and your dad remembered something else totally different.

ELLEN: Like that movie *Rashomon*.

MAUREEN: Pretty much. Maybe I should take this box. I'd get three memories for one item.

ELLEN (*picking up a locket from shelf*): How about this one? What do you remember about it?

MAUREEN: That was your good luck charm when you were in the math competition.

ELLEN: I thought it was from the state track meet. (*They share an amused look.*) Maybe I wore it for the math contest, too. At least I won that one.

MAUREEN: And that wasn't luck.

ELLEN: You know what I remember from that math contest?

MAUREEN: What?

ELLEN: That judge who stopped us afterward and told me that I must have inherited a math gene from my father the astronaut.

MAUREEN: And I told him you got it from me.

ELLEN: You didn't just tell him. You got all huffy and were like, "Excuuuuuse me. My husband and I were *both* in the astronaut program. He was a fighter pilot who did math reluctantly. I am an aerospace engineer who does calculus in my sleep! I'm pretty sure she got it from me."

MAUREEN: Oh, I didn't say it like that.

ELLEN: Yes you did.

MAUREEN: Well, he must have thought I was an egotistical jerk.

ELLEN: So he'd be right about at least one thing. What? Just being honest.

MAUREEN: Maybe we should have focused less on honesty and more on tact when you were little.

ELLEN: My point is, he did not think you were a jerk. I overheard him talking to one of the teachers a few days later, and it seems he thought you were flirting with him.

MAUREEN: You're kidding. You must have misheard him.

ELLEN: Pretty sure I didn't. But let's look at the possibilities. I could have misheard him. He could have misheard you. I could be inaccurately remembering how you spoke to him, and so could you. Or maybe all three of us were hit by some sort of group hallucination.

MAUREEN: Or he could be some weirdo who's turned on by egotistical jerks.

ELLEN: There you go. The point is, we'll never know what really happened there.

MAUREEN: And the more we try to remember it, the further from the truth we'll probably get.

ELLEN: Probably. You know, this could make a great science fair topic for next year. Does Heisenberg's uncertainty principle apply to communication as well as physics?

MAUREEN: Something like ... if you're sure of what you said, you don't know exactly how it will be perceived. And if you know how a statement was perceived, you won't know exactly what was said.

ELLEN: But to test that, you'd have to go around making a lot of egotistical jerk statements, and you'd end up pissing off all your friends. (*Both of them chuckle.*)

MAUREEN: It's a good thing we have each other. Who else would be this geeky?

ELLEN: Ummm ... everyone you work with?

MAUREEN: Point and match to you. (*Going back to the bookshelf.*) But this still isn't getting me any closer to picking my stuff.

(*Maureen's cell rings. It's sitting on the desk and Ellen is closer to it, glances at it.*)

ELLEN: It's Juanita Forbes.

MAUREEN: Oh crap, what could she want? They hate it when you don't answer, but I need a minute. Pick it up and tell her I'm in the bathroom, and I'll call her right back.

ELLEN (*picks up phone*): Hello, Maureen Garvin's phone.

JUANITA: (pause) Oh, hello. For a second I thought I'd gotten her voicemail.

ELLEN: No, this her daughter Ellen, Dr. Forbes. Mom's in the bathroom, but I know she wouldn't want to miss a call from you. Can she call you back in a few minutes?

JUANITA: Sure, that'll be fine. I met you at the picnic last summer, didn't I?

ELLEN: That's right. It was just for a minute – I'm surprised you remember.

JUANITA: We try to take notice of potential candidates.

ELLEN: Oh, wow!

JUANITA: *If* you keep up your good work. There's lots of tough competition.

ELLEN: Believe me, I know. I'll be sure and tell Mom you called as soon as she's out.

JUANITA: Thank you, Ellen. Bye now.

ELLEN: Goodbye. (*Returns phone to desk*) How come you didn't want to answer, Mom?

MAUREEN: You know she's the head of psych evals. (*Ellen nods.*) Which means you always want to be careful talking to her. You never know what might be a test.

ELLEN: This late? It's only two months before you leave. They wouldn't replace you now.

MAUREEN: They could. The alternates have been training right along with us in case somebody gets sick or hurt ... or flunks a surprise psych evaluation.

ELLEN: Mom, are you really worried about that? You've done great on everything.

MAUREEN: This is NASA. You could be God himself and they'd find room for improvement somewhere.

ELLEN: Any idea what they might be testing for?

MAUREEN: My Achilles heel on these things has always been my sense of humour.

ELLEN: Humour? I would think they'd want people who take things seriously. And besides, what's wrong with your sense of humour?

MAUREEN: Apparently I come off a little too serious sometimes.

ELLEN: Well, I'm sure they don't want a bunch of comedians up there.

MAUREEN: No. But this will be the longest mission yet. Four people sharing a space the size of a *small* one-bedroom apartment for a year and a half. If you don't have a sense of humour ...

ELLEN: Oh yeah, that could be trouble. "If you whistle the Oscar Mayer wiener song one more time, I'm gonna push you out the airlock."

MAUREEN: Exactly. But ... I'm flexible, I'm adaptable, I can see the funny side of things and roll with the punches. *(She picks up her phone.)*

ELLEN: Remember, a big smile on your face comes through in your voice.

MAUREEN: What?

ELLEN: First thing they taught us when I had that summer job taking phone orders. *(She uses her index fingers to push the corners of her mouth up into an exaggerated grin. This makes Maureen laugh.)*

MAUREEN: So, smile before you dial?

ELLEN: You got it.

(Maureen puts on a big smile and hits the call button.)

JUANITA *(offstage voice)*: Hello, Maureen.

MAUREEN: Hi, Juanita. Sorry I missed your call.

JUANITA: No worries. I was just calling to see how you're coming with your PPK box and whether you had any questions.

MAUREEN: That's what I'm working on this afternoon. It's not easy to choose.

JUANITA: That's why we give you a couple weeks to do it.

MAUREEN: It's easier to figure out what not to take than what to put in.

JUANITA: That's interesting. What have you ruled out?

MAUREEN: Well, no need to take things like books or pictures or music. All that can be stored digitally.

JUANITA: True. Although some people have chosen to take a physical book, most often the Bible, just in case there's a total failure of all systems.

MAUREEN: That's kind of a grim thought. And if that happened, there wouldn't be any light to read it by anyway. Unless you packed a pen light, too.

JUANITA: You are the practical minded one, aren't you?

MAUREEN: Not entirely. *(She pulls the box of tissues out of the metal box.)* I mean, if I were all that practical, I'd take advantage of the fact that the box is exactly the right size to hold a box of tissues.

JUANITA: Tissues?

MAUREEN: Tissues are going to be essential. Nobody wants random strings of weightless snot drifting around.

JUANITA *(chuckles)*: That is not a pretty picture. *(Maureen grins and flashes a thumbs-up sign to Ellen.)*

MAUREEN: Really, though, I'm trying the Marie Kondo approach. Looking for things that spark joy.

JUANITA: Seems like a promising way to go.

MAUREEN: My daughter suggested some, as she put it, kick-ass nail polish.

JUANITA: That's a fun thought. But of course, we don't want you to bring liquids. Just in case of breakage.

MAUREEN: Ah. So no globs of Dream Poppy floating through the cabin. That knocks out the mini-bottle of champagne, too.

JUANITA: And that's a shame. But it does bring me to the reason for my call. We have a couple of things we specifically ask people to avoid. The list was supposed to be included with the empty boxes, but I just found out that it wasn't, so I wanted to make you aware of those.

MAUREEN: Okay. Let me write them down. *(Picks up pen and paper.)* So ... no liquids.

JUANITA: Right. No weapons of any kind.

MAUREEN: Well, darn. Ellen, I guess you can keep the pistol here.

JUANITA: No drugs or mind-altering substances.

MAUREEN: Makes sense.

JUANITA: No food items.

MAUREEN (*exaggerated sigh*): There goes the lasagna.

JUANITA: Nothing alive.

MAUREEN: You really had to make that rule?

JUANITA: Someone who will remain nameless wanted to bring a hamster once.

MAUREEN: I respect people's privacy, so I'll pretend I don't know that was Danny.

JUANITA: Very discreet.

MAUREEN: We all knew that thing went everywhere in his pocket. I didn't realize he wanted to take it to the station though.

JUANITA: He tried to claim it would be some kind of experiment. Personally, I never saw the appeal of that short-tailed rat.

MAUREEN: Right. Or of the hamster, either.

JUANITA (*laughs*): You're in a mood today.

MAUREEN: Just kidding. You know he and I got along fine.

JUANITA: I know. Let's see ... no preserved tissue.

MAUREEN: Preserved?

JUANITA: Essentially, nothing taxidermied. Those might harbor microbes.

MAUREEN: I'll bet there's a story behind that rule, too. And I think I'm glad I don't know what it is.

JUANITA: Good, because I can't say.

MAUREEN: No worries, I'm very happy not to take any dead animals.

JUANITA: That's about it.

MAUREEN: Once I've decided, do you want a list of the stuff I'm taking?

JUANITA: That's okay, we'll check the box over when you bring it in. Remember, we'll need that by the 10th of next month.

MAUREEN: Got it.

JUANITA: And that's it. Have a nice rest of your day.

MAUREEN: You too, Juanita. Bye bye.

JUANITA: Bye, Maureen.

(Maureen ends call and puts phone on desk.)

MAUREEN: I think that went pretty well. If it was a test. Probably wasn't.

ELLEN: Weightless strings of snot, Mom? Really?

MAUREEN: Just humourously anticipating possible dangers.

ELLEN: If you say so.

MAUREEN: Now back to the hard part, picking stuff for the box. Any ideas about what I should take for you?

ELLEN: Still thinking. You're right, this is hard. I could give you my diary to read. That way, you'll think about me endlessly, but by the time you get home, your anger will have had a chance to dissipate.

MAUREEN: Joy. Joy. We want to spark *joy*.

ELLEN: Oh yeah. Still thinking.

(Doorbell rings, voice calls from offstage)

JACKSON: Mom, are you home? Ellen, you there?

MAUREEN: Would you get the door for your brother? He must not have his key.

ELLEN: Sure.

(She exits and comes back a moment later with Jackson.)

JACKSON: Hey, Mom.

MAUREEN: Hi, Jackson. You're off today?

JACKSON: They changed my hours around. I came by to see if I could borrow the truck. A buddy of mine's moving and none of us have anything big enough to hold a sofa.

ELLEN: It's a shame you didn't get here a few minutes earlier. You missed Mom trying to be funny.

JACKSON: The female equivalent of dad jokes?

MAUREEN: Oh for heaven's sake, I'm not that bad. I have a sense of humour.

JACKSON: If you did, would we need to explain that we're joking right now? Anyway, am I good to take the truck for a couple hours?

MAUREEN: I don't see why not. Somebody should use it. You know, you could sell your car and I'd give you the truck for good.

JACKSON: I couldn't afford the gas. And a big old pickup is not exactly a chick magnet.

MAUREEN: It worked for your father. We took our share of romantic drives in it.

JACKSON: You always said it was the most uncomfortable thing you ever rode in. You hated that truck.

MAUREEN: I didn't *hate* it.

JACKSON: You said the seat felt like it was made of solid brick.

ELLEN: And it made your back hurt. You were always after Dad to get rid of it.

JACKSON: Yeah. I'm surprised you kept it.

MAUREEN: I was going to sell it, so I took it in to get it tuned up. But when I went into the garage and that side was empty, it was like walking into a hole in my heart. I couldn't do it, not then. I'd be fine if you took it now. Or maybe Ellen wants it.

ELLEN: Umm ... pass. You may have forgotten how uncomfortable it is, but I haven't.

MAUREEN: I haven't forgotten, it just doesn't seem so important any more.

ELLEN: Like we were just saying ... memories change. (*She picks the wooden box up off the shelf and hands it to Jackson.*) Jackson, do you remember where we got this?

JACKSON: Yeah, it was in Grenada. That's the box we couldn't avoid.

ELLEN: What's that mean?

JACKSON: We kept seeing the same design. Dad noticed one in an airport shop window when we first got there. Then some beach vendor tried to sell one to Mom. And I found this one in that Scavenger's Booty shop at the resort when I was looking for a souvenir. It was like, if life's going to keep putting the same thing in front of us, maybe we're meant to have it.

MAUREEN: I'm starting to think I really should take this box. (*She takes it from Jackson and sets it in on her desk by the metal box.*)

JACKSON: Take it where?

MAUREEN: On the mission. We get one box of personal stuff.

ELLEN: Hey Jackson, did you know Mom and Dad were going to get divorced if NASA wouldn't let them go to Mars as a couple?

JACKSON: Did you just hear about that?

MAUREEN: You knew?

JACKSON: Yeah, Dad and I talked about it not long before he died. He hated the idea.

MAUREEN: Well, it wasn't something either one of us *wanted* to do. But even if it had happened, it wouldn't have made any difference in the way we all lived.

ELLEN: Dad talked to you about that? No one ever said anything to me about it until today.

JACKSON: I was 15. You were a 10-year-old kid. No one wanted to worry you, but I guess he thought I was old enough to handle it. He had to talk to someone. It was tearing him up inside.

MAUREEN: He wasn't crazy about it, but it was something we would have been willing to do if we had to.

JACKSON: *You* were willing to do it. You were willing to do anything to make that mission. Dad was willing to do anything to make you happy, even if it made him miserable.

MAUREEN: Except get rid of that truck.

JACKSON (*suddenly angry*): Oh, *now* you have a sense of humour. Nothing touches you, does it? Nothing but NASA and space and the mission, and if the rest of us just disappeared, you wouldn't even care. You probably wouldn't even notice.

ELLEN: Jackson, what the fuck?

JACKSON: Don't you start. You're cut from the same cloth. Little Miss Perfect, math genius, track star. She's dragging you down her same path and you're too stupid ... yes *stupid*, you're stupid about some shit, Ellen ... like what the hell she's done to our lives.

MAUREEN: Jackson, where is this coming from?

JACKSON: It's coming from the only one left in this family who doesn't have his head in outer space. Dad didn't think life would just go on the same if you got divorced. He thought it would be turning your backs on what you had. Denying what it meant. Like when Galileo recanted his discoveries.

ELLEN: 'Cause they would have tortured him to death if he hadn't.

JACKSON: No one was going to torture them. She wouldn't have gotten the job she wanted, that's all. Billions of people don't go to Mars, and they survive. And they stay married. But not you. You're more married to NASA than you ever were to Dad.

MAUREEN: Jackson, I ... I don't even know what to say to that.

JACKSON: Because it's true. You can just abandon us for a year and a half and not even care. Your career has always been the most important thing to you. I remember how the two of you used to fight about it.

(overlapping) MAUREEN: We never fought. ELLEN: You're crazy. I don't remember fights.

JACKSON: Nobody yelled or threw things. But sometimes there was so much tension I could feel my skin prickling like a giant static charge. And all those nights that you'd go back to work, or shut yourself up in this office – it was Dad who helped us with homework or showed up for stuff at school, or just listened to us.

ELLEN: Mom came to school stuff.

JACKSON: Your stuff. Science fairs and math contests. When you were acting like her little Mini-Me, she'd be there. And Dad too. But when our guitar class gave a recital, it was just him. I remember him trying to make excuses for her.

ELLEN: You're still whining about that? Geez, get over it.

JACKSON: Get over yourselves! Not everybody can just brush off people's feelings like you two can. Husband? Kids? Oh, they'll be fine, gotta work on these formulas.

MAUREEN: That wasn't how I felt. I hated having to miss things you did ...

JACKSON: Sure. But not enough to change anything. You were just like, the kids won't be hurt if I don't show up. My husband won't be hurt if we get a divorce so I have a better shot at going to Mars. But I hurt. He hurt. Sometimes I wonder if it was really an accident that his plane crashed.

MAUREEN: How can you even suggest that? I heard the recording. He was trying everything he could to regain control right up to the last second.

ELLEN: Dad would never have done that. I don't believe it.

JACKSON: You just don't want to.

ELLEN: Because it's not true. But you *want* it to be true, so you can wallow around in your self-pity ...

JACKSON: Stuff it, Ellen!

MAUREEN: Stop it! Stop it, both of you! Jackson, you've got this all twisted around in your head. I know you were hurt, we were all hurt, but that's not the way it happened. Your emotions have your memories confused and ...

JACKSON: Spare me the NASA psychobabble. You've got your tissue of lies all worked out, so you can believe what you want to. I'm taking Dad's truck now. And maybe I will keep it. At least I'll appreciate it. *(He exits, slamming the door behind him.)*

MAUREEN: Jackson!

ELLEN: Should I go after him?

MAUREEN: What are you going to do, tell him his memories are wrong? He won't believe you.

ELLEN: *Are* his memories wrong?

MAUREEN: God, I hope so.

ELLEN: That's not the way I remember stuff, Mom. I remember you being there for us a lot, and when you weren't, there was a good reason.

MAUREEN: I had no clue he was so angry. He's never said a word about it before. How could I miss something like that?

ELLEN: He'll get over it. You know how he is. He freaks out and blows up, but a day later it's like nothing ever happened.

MAUREEN: Maybe. I don't want to leave with this hanging in between us.

ELLEN: There's still two months. Give him a day or two to calm down and then reach out. Maybe you could ask him what you should take along to remember him. You know, kind of include him in the process.

MAUREEN: Is that straight out of your Intro to Psych class?

ELLEN: Yep.

MAUREEN: Well, it might not be a bad idea. *(Pause)* So, what's in your diary that would make me so mad I'd need a year and a half to calm down?

ELLEN: Nothing I'd be dumb enough to tell you about. *(Pause)* Kidding, Mom. Sense of humour, remember? *(Ellen gives Maureen a hug.)* Don't stress. Everything's going to be all right. I've got to go do some homework. *(Ellen exits.)*

(Maureen regards the shelf, picks up an item, puts it down again.)

MAUREEN: Maybe this isn't the best time to try and pick out stuff for the box.

TOM *(offstage voice)*: Are you gonna sit and stew about Jackson instead? Focusing on the job at hand was always your best therapy.

MAUREEN: Huh. Audio-hallucinating my dead husband. That'll help.

(Tom enters, but not through the door. On a proscenium stage, the actor may have been concealed behind the desk and just stands up from there. Or comes up through a floor trap. Or he simply walks on through any space other than the door.)

TOM: Oh, more than just audio. How are you, Maureen?

MAUREEN: Bat-shit crazy, evidently.

TOM: You don't really think that.

MAUREEN: No. And you're not a real hallucination.

TOM: I'm not sure there's any such thing as a *real* hallucination.

MAUREEN: You know what I mean.

TOM: Of course I do. I'm part of you, conjured up from the depths of your brain tissue.

MAUREEN: In other words, a memory. *(She moves around him, looking at him from several angles.)* A really vivid memory.

(Maureen reaches out one finger to try to touch Tom. He holds up a hand, palm out, warding her off without touching her.)

TOM: Don't push your luck.

MAUREEN: Fair enough. Even if you're not real, it's nice to see you. You haven't aged a day.

TOM: Your memory of me stops when I'm 39.

MAUREEN: So even though you'll always be with me, you'll never grow old along with me.

TOM: Kind of a nice perk, but not really compensation for dying young.

MAUREEN: So ... why have I called you here today?

TOM: It seems you've got some issues to deal with.

MAUREEN: Yeah. Stuff I had no idea even was an issue. This whole thing with Jackson. Since you're a projection from my brain, I assume you already know the back story.

TOM: I was there for it.

MAUREEN: What I don't get is how this is going to help me understand anything. You're not really a different person, you're just a part of me. You're not bringing anything new to the table.

TOM: Maybe, maybe not. Maybe I'm a way to get a new perspective on things. What would Tom do?

MAUREEN: What *would* Tom do? He'd remind me that I'm not always right about things. That I should try to look at things a different way. Jackson's way.

TOM: How does Jackson fit into this family?

MAUREEN: In a lot of ways he doesn't. That sounds terrible.

TOM: Don't worry about how things sound. You're just talking to yourself here.

MAUREEN: Yeah. Take school. He wasn't a bad student, he's smart enough, but he never had all that much drive. Grades weren't important to him. I never could figure out a way to motivate him.

TOM: Motivate him to do what?

MAUREEN: To try to do better. To get the grades I knew he could.

TOM: Why?

MAUREEN: So he could make something of himself.

TOM: What? An astronaut?

MAUREEN: I never pushed him to go for that.

TOM: Not in so many words. But Ellen went for that stuff naturally.

MAUREEN: Like mother, like daughter.

TOM: No denying the bond between you two.

MAUREEN: No.

TOM: So where does that leave Jackson?

MAUREEN: Working retail.

TOM: Oh for God's sake, Maureen ... can you define somebody by something other than their job?

MAUREEN: I don't do that ...

TOM: And stop being defensive. It's not helpful. Yes, Jackson didn't go to college. He's happy working an average job. What else can you say about him?

MAUREEN: He likes playing the guitar, but he's never going to make a living ...

TOM: Stop that! Just stop. Try it this way. He likes playing the guitar, and he works at it because he finds beauty and value in it, not because it's a job.

MAUREEN: He just ... enjoys it. Nothing wrong with that.

TOM: Unless you live in a house where everybody else is trying to go to Mars.

MAUREEN: Yeah.

TOM: Why'd he stop by today?

MAUREEN: To tell me what a crappy mother I've been.

TOM: No, that happened later. He came to borrow the truck.

MAUREEN: To help his friend move.

TOM: Why?

MAUREEN: Because nobody hires movers when they're 22.

TOM: Look deeper.

MAUREEN: Well, he's always been helpful. He spent a whole summer helping Ricky build that treehouse. He loved helping you tinker with the truck and work in your shop.

TOM: How does he help you and Ellen?

MAUREEN: He was always good about doing chores around the house when he lived at home.

TOM: Great. He did the grunt work while you two had your heads in the stars.

MAUREEN: You make it sound like he's Cinderella and we're the Ugly Stepsisters.

TOM: That's probably what it feels like to him.

MAUREEN: I *am* a crappy mother. (*Beat.*)

TOM: Are you waiting for me to disagree with you?

MAUREEN: I guess not.

TOM: Find a way to need him, Maureen. Stop being so damned self-sufficient and let him help you.

MAUREEN: How?

TOM: It won't happen overnight, but you'll figure it out – just pay attention. Appreciate him for who he is. Ellen needs to need him while you're gone, too. Make sure she understands that.

MAUREEN: You know, you were a wonderful husband, but I think memory might be making you even better. Whenever I think about you, the little things that would annoy me seem less and less clear. I know we had our issues, but it's like they're fading away.

TOM: By the time you're 95, you ought to have me practically perfect.

MAUREEN: You'll be the astronaut version of George Washington and the cherry tree. But I'd still rather have you alive with all your flaws.

TOM: I'd prefer that myself.

MAUREEN: So, what Jackson said about the plane crash. You didn't really ...

TOM: Do you even have to ask?

MAUREEN: Not really. I know you didn't choose that. I just hope he can understand someday.

TOM: Me too.

(A beat while they regard each other.)

MAUREEN: As long as you're here, you want to help me figure out what to put in my PPK?

TOM: Oh, I think you know.

MAUREEN: Taking something to remind me of you is starting to seem pointless. You're alive in my mind. Linking you to one object, one memory ... that'd be limiting. I'll always have all of you, right here *(clasping her hands over her heart)*. No matter where I go. Mementos would just be a box of useless stuff.

TOM: That's true right here, too. *(Tom moves to the bookshelf and taps gently on the urn.)* You don't need a ... thing ... to keep me in your heart.

MAUREEN: I know.

TOM: So don't keep that thing here. Take *me* to Mars, Maureen.

MAUREEN: Is that really what you'd want? I mean, what Tom would want? You're not really him, you're just me remembering him.

TOM: That's what's left of me in this world, Maureen. Mementos are just things. Ashes are just things. Useless stuff. I'm alive in your memories, and Ellen's and Jackson's. You'll always have that. So make the grand gesture.

MAUREEN: You're sure?

TOM: Don't think about it. Feel it. Does it resonate in your heart?

(Maureen, caught on the edge between a smile and tears, can only nod her head.)

TOM: Take me to Mars. Let's go together like we always dreamed. Then leave me there. First permanent colonist.

(Maureen goes to the bookshelf, takes the urn and opens it. While her back is to him, Tom silently exits however he came in.)

MAUREEN: I'll have to seal you up in something. The urn won't fit, and we don't want you floating all through the cabin. *(She turns.)* Tom?

(She places takes the urn to the desk. As the lights very slowly fade, she opens the wooden box, pours the ashes into it, closes it, and places it in the metal box.)

MAUREEN: My husband and I are going to Mars.