

THE LIFE OF TREES

A short play

by

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THE LIFE OF TREES

CHARACTERS

JACK

ERIN

MADDY, their daughter, aged 7

PLACE

The living room of their home

TIME

The present

THE LIFE OF TREES

A living room, simply furnished. Early evening. JACK is standing reading a letter. He tosses the letter down on the couch. He sits, picks it up, reads it again. He puts the letter to one side, and leans back with his hands behind his head, staring into his memory. A beat. ERIN enters. She carries a full laundry basket.

ERIN

Whoever invented fitted sheets never had to fold them. It had to be a man.

She throws him a fitted sheet. He starts to fold it. She folds other laundry.

Maddy had a great time on the field trip.

JACK stops folding the sheet. She looks at him. Beat.

What?

JACK indicates the letter. ERIN picks it up and reads.

You're going, right?

JACK

No.

ERIN

He's dieing.

JACK

Not necessarily.

ERIN

It says here—

JACK

It could be months.

ERIN

He's your only brother.

(Beat.)

Okay, so—

JACK

She's seven years old, and he's never seen her.

ERIN

Jack, he's dieing.

JACK

He's in New York at least once a year. It's a five-hour drive.

ERIN

We could have gone there.

JACK

To Italy?

ERIN

To New York, when he was visiting. It would be good for Maddy.

JACK

Good?

ERIN

To see you guys together.

JACK

What would I say to him?

ERIN

She has an uncle she's never seen and a Dad who hasn't spoken to his brother in twelve years. She should know the world doesn't have to be like this.

JACK

She has other aunts and uncles.

ERIN

Don't make Maddy the excuse.

JACK

I don't need an excuse.

ERIN

The reason. The reason you won't do this.

JACK

You just said I should do it for her.

ERIN

You know what I mean.

Beat. The coo of a mourning dove from offstage. MADDY enters. She is holding a birdcall whistle. She blows it again. More cooing.

(To MADDY, gently reprimanding)

Honey—

MADDY

I wonder what it's like to be a mourning dove.

ERIN

Not in here, okay? Outside.

MADDY blows it again.

ERIN

(Warning her)

Maddy....

MADDY

Mrs. Donovan said that if you keep blowing the birds will come. What's wrong?

ERIN

We're just talking.

MADDY

You're fighting.

ERIN

No, we're talking.

MADDY

What about?

ERIN

Your Uncle Andrew.

MADDY
The one I've never met who lives in Italy?

ERIN
Yes.

MADDY
What about him?

ERIN
He's real sick.

MADDY
Is he dieing?

JACK
Yes. Yes he is.

MADDY starts to cry.

ERIN
(Comforting her)
I know, honey, I know, it's sad. But it's okay, really, he's going to a better place.

MADDY
Can we go see him?

JACK
It's a long way away, honey.

MADDY
But we have to.

JACK
It may not be—

MADDY
We have to see him before he dies.

ERIN
Daddy and I'll talk about it, okay? Right now, I'm going to fix us some dinner.
Want to help?

MADDY
No.

ERIN

You are the world's best cheese grater.

MADDY

I want to stay here with Daddy.

ERIN

Okay.

ERIN exits.

JACK

So tell me about the field trip. You went to the arboretum, right?

MADDY

Yeah.

JACK

Did you climb that old beech tree?

MADDY

You can't climb the trees! You hurt them if you do that.

JACK

Oh right.

MADDY

But we did hug Bertha.

JACK

The big cork tree?

MADDY

Yeah. Me and Alicia and Sara and Jasmine and Tyrone and Bobby and Keesha and Maggie—we all joined hands and Bertha was so big we had to stretch and stretch and stretch to get our arms around her, but we did it.

JACK

Great!

MADDY

She really needs hugs. She's lonely. She's been lonely all her life.

JACK

But there are lots of trees there, from all over the world.

MADDY

But she's the only cork tree from China! She came here all by herself in 1921. She was just a baby then, a tiny little plant. And Doctor Leverett, he was a botanist, he brought her here and planted her in the arboretum. And that was it. She never got to see her family again. I mean, the people at the arboretum take care of her and everything and the mourning doves come and visit—they like the little berries she produces in the fall, that's why they're always there, eating the berries. And she gets hugs from kids like us. But Bertha's never seen any of her family from China. Not once. In eighty-nine years. Can you imagine?

JACK

Well, it's not quite like that.

MADDY

What do you mean?

JACK

Trees aren't like us. They don't have feelings.

MADDY

Of course they do! Bertha feels sad. Real sad.

(Beat.)

Daddy, why have I never met Uncle Andrew?

JACK

It's a long story.

MADDY

I like long stories.

JACK

It's complicated.

MADDY

I'm smart.

JACK

That's true, that is very true. Well, a long time ago, your Uncle Andrew and I had a kind of a disagreement.

MADDY

A fight.

JACK

A disagreement.

MADDY

What about?

JACK

When my father died—your grandfather—we decided to sell the house in Michigan—

MADDY

The big smelly one?

JACK

Yep, the big smelly one where your Uncle Andrew and I grew up. Because now it was empty, and we lived here, and Uncle Andrew lived in Italy, and we didn't need it any more. So we sold it. And there was a piano there, a beautiful old piano that my father used to play. I played it, too—he taught me to play on that piano. It had this wonderful tone. Rich and warm...sweet.

MADDY

Like hot fudge.

JACK

As yummy as that. Well, anyway, it was very special to me and I wanted to bring it here. And I wanted you, when you came along, to learn to play on it like I had. Only your Uncle Andrew had other ideas.

MADDY

He took it.

JACK

And he sold it.

MADDY

Why?

JACK

For money.

MADDY

Did he give you some of the money?

JACK

No. And I wouldn't have taken it anyway.

MADDY

Because you were mad at him for selling the piano.

JACK
Yes.

MADDY
That's it?

JACK
There were other things.

MADDY
But that was the big thing?

JACK
It was the last straw.

MADDY
The straw that broke the camel's back.

JACK
You got it.

MADDY
And you haven't spoken to him since then?

JACK
No.

MADDY
Not even on the phone?

JACK
Not even on the phone.

MADDY
How come you guys didn't make up? It was just a piano.

JACK
It was something very special to me and he knew that.

MADDY
I guess that was kinda mean. But we have another piano now.

JACK
Yes, we do.

And I'm learning to play on that.

MADDY

And you've got to practice more.

JACK

Does he know what I look like?

MADDY

Who?

JACK

Uncle Andrew.

MADDY

He has photos.

JACK

You sent him photos of me?

MADDY

Your Mom did.

JACK

Have we got photos of him?

MADDY

Somewhere.

JACK

Can I see them?

MADDY

They're pretty old.

JACK

I bet he looks like you.

MADDY

Not much.

JACK

I wish I had a brother.

MADDY

JACK

I know you do. But this way, you get all the attention in the world. And the tickles.

He tickles her, she giggles hysterically, then she jumps up.

MADDY

Let's go give Bertha a hug!

JACK

It's dinner time.

MADDY

After dinner!

JACK

On a school night?

MADDY

Please!

JACK

Okay.

MADDY

And stop for ice-cream on the way back?

JACK

You are irresistible.

MADDY

YES! Daddy, you gotta be real careful when you hug Bertha.

JACK

Oh yeah?

MADDY

She is so gnarly.

JACK

Gnarly?

MADDY

Isn't that a cool word? I learned it today. I'll go tell Mom!

She exits. He picks up the letter and looks at it again. After a moment, he pulls out his cell phone and dials.

JACK

Andrew, it's Jack.... Your brother....

Lights fade.

END OF PLAY