

Underneath
By Dana Hall

Cast:

STEVE: Age 30+, steadfast in knowing what he wants for his parents.

MOM (Rosie): Stage age- 65+ she is very ill, moves slowly, loves deeply.

DAD (Edward): Stage age 65+, reserved, protective of his wife.

Synopsis: Steve is concerned about the amount of *stuff* his elderly parents have packed into their home. He has come to help but finds out that they have a lot more in those boxes than he imagined.

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At Rise: A living room current day. There are moving boxes and overflowing storage bins creating a cocoon. There's a table with boxes on top of it. STEVE enters and DAD is in his chair reading a newspaper and drinking a beer.

STEVE: Hey Dad- is mom around?

DAD: Yeah, she's in the kitchen.

STEVE: Did you go through the boxes like I asked Dad?

DAD ignores STEVE and goes on reading.

STEVE: Dad. Put down the paper.

DAD: (*Annoyed closed paper*) Whaaaat?

STEVE: The boxes on the table, did you go through them?

DAD: I did.

DAD goes back to the newspaper. STEVE grabs it.

DAD: Hey-

STEVE: Doesn't look like it. Did you throw anything away?

DAD: It's MY house or have you forgotten.

STEVE: So -that's a no. This place is filled with boxes - it's becoming unsafe. I brought these down here and put them right on the table so the two of you would have to start getting rid of things.

DAD: They're important documents. Steve- you just don't *throw* them out.

STEVE: Fine. I'll get you a shredder.

DAD: I have one. I don't need it for this- these are all keepers/

STEVE: Keepers? What the hell are you talking about-

STEVE picks up a random piece of paper from the box and reads it.

STEVE: (cont) The Lansing Gazette March of 2019. (*Sarcastic*) Oh look, breaking news the church had a bake sale. Unless you have a scientist with crazy hair and a DeLorean, this is useless to us. Come on Dad- these are just old papers.

As DAD talks STEVE is digging in a box. He is pulling out ridiculous items.

DAD: You kids these days just don't appreciate anything. Throw it away- toss. toss. toss. (*points O.S to window*) What's that on the tree out there? Oh look it's money- blossoming all around us- hurry lets throw away all these things just to buy more.

STEVE: What's this?

STEVE pulls out a shoebox wrapped tightly with rubber bands.

DAD: Hey! Put that back.

DAD rushes over to STEVE and takes the box out of his hands.

DAD: Give me that!

While DAD is caressing the box, he lets Steve know what it is.

DAD: It's Rhonda.

STEVE: Rhonda!

DAD: Shhh!

STEVE: The guinea pig I had when I was eight?! I thought you buried her!

DAD half-threatening whispers to Steve.

DAD: Don't tell your mother.

STEVE: (*Without hesitation he calls for his mother*) Mom! Mom! Can you come here-

DAD mumbles something about how STEVE doesn't need to involve MOM in everything. MOM comes into the living room slowly and uses a cane for support. DAD shoves the box back at the bottom of the large box.

MOM: (*As she enters*) What! Is someone on fire!? Who's screaming their head off?

STEVE: Mom/

MOM: Stevey! You look starved. I've got some soup on the stove.

STEVE: I'm fine mom. I thought I told you and Dad to go through these things.

MOM: You did, dear.

STEVE: So?

MOM: So- we didn't listen.

STEVE stands holding his head, clearly frustrated.

MOM: Those lines on his face come from your family not mine. Those are stress wrinkles.

DAD sees an opportunity to get the newspaper. STEVE pushes it further out of his reach. Dad sits in his chair annoyed.

STEVE: Maybe because the two of you are stressing me out.

MOM: Oh honey, relax.

STEVE: Relax? How can I relax when you can't do one simple thing without me? I'm trying to help and what do I get in return- Rhonda/

MOM as though she is breaking the news for the first time explains to Steve.

MOM: Rhonda? Honey, Rhonda is dead.

STEVE: (*blows up*) I know! Tell him that!

MOM: Your father knows he buried her by the tree in the back.

**DAD gives STEVE ‘the look.’
MOM sits next to STEVE and humors him
by taking a paper out of the box.**

MOM: I’ll go through a box if it makes that vein in your head go away dear. Let’s see now. Ok. Oh dear what do we have here?...Oh look- your 6th-grade science fair award, and here is your report card from St. Catherine’s from fourth grade. Says here you were a bit chatty- but that Mrs. Kowalski had it out for you. (*Comforts him though he doesn’t need it*) Oh, looky here’s your jersey from 7th-grade basketball! Put it on for old times-

STEVE: (*like a child*) No.

MOM: (*pleading*) Please.

STEVE: (*Whinny*) Nooo. I don’t wanna.

MOM: Oh make your poor old mother happy will ya?

Reluctantly, STEVE puts the jersey over his clothing. He looks ridiculous. DAD has gone back to relaxing with his newspaper.

DAD: (*poking fun*) Fits like a bug snug in a rug.

STEVE: Thanks, dad.

MOM: You’re so handsome Stevey - you look a lot like your brother Tommy in that- he loved sports.

STEVE: Man- I must’ve been a fat kid.

MOM: (*messing with his hair*) Nonsense. You were perfect just like you are today I wouldn’t change a hair on your head.

STEVE: Great thanks, mom. I’ll add that to my dating profile.

MOM: You’re a catch - put that on the inter-web! The ladies should be sweeping right on those little dimples.

STEVE: I don’t have dimples mom.

MOM: Well not on your face/

STEVE: Oh wow! Ok. Well this walk down memory lane has been fun. What else do we

have...

STEVE puts the jersey back and takes out x rays.

STEVE: Are these Tommy's x rays?

MOM: Mmnnhmm.

MOM grabs them without further acknowledgment and stuffs them deep into the box.

Steve: Mom/

MOM: (*Continues trying to divert attention*) So how's was the weather out there-looked like rain and then nothing all day/

MOM continues talking over Steve.

STEVE: Mom - why not get rid of some of this (stuff)/

MOM: You know you can't trust those guys on TV - they're actors ya know not scientists.

STEVE: Don't you two want to have a nice clean place to live in?

DAD: Nothing wrong with our house son. (*to Mom*) Paper says clear skies all week.

MOM: See - can't trust the TV!

STEVE, as MOM is preoccupied with other items in the box, moves closer to DAD.

STEVE: (*whispers*) Don't you want *her* to have a comfortable place?

DAD: It's plenty comfortable.

DAD makes himself more comfortable-kicks up his feet. STEVE feeling defeated changes the subject.

STEVE: How was dialysis mom?

MOM: (*casual*) Didn't go. Oh look that playbill from that play you were in sophomore year of high school what was it called/

STEVE: It's missing the cover.

MOM: (*Trying to remember*) Oh... what was it called?

STEVE: Into The Woods.

MOM: Yes, that's it! You were that beautiful golden harp. My little actor.

STEVE: Mom-the golden harp isn't a character; it's a prop. The director basically wrote it into the play so my feelings wouldn't be hurt. I'm pretty sure you had something to do with that...

MOM: There are no small parts dear.

DAD: Or short plays- 2 hours and 40 minutes that one was/

STEVE: What year was I born dad?

(Dates can change to reflect actor's age)

DAD: Uhhh 76' no 77' - don't tell me I'll get it. 78'?

MOM: No, that was Tommy. Uhh 79? Am I close?

STEVE: 80- 1980 guys. You can't remember my birthday but you remember how long a play from 20 something years ago was?

DAD: How could I forget! Those seats had my sciatica flaring up.

MOM: Lucy Schmidt's mom with her big hair sat right in front of me - enough Aquanet to suffocate a bear I tell ya.

STEVE: Sorry for the inconvenience guys- *so* glad we saved this Playbill, chock-full of family memories.

STEVE takes the playbill and starts a 'throw away' pile.

MOM: What are you doing?

STEVE: Dad said there were 'important documents' in there so I'm putting this here in the 'throw away' pile as we sort through it.

MOM reaches over and takes the playbill back and puts it in another box.

MOM: They're all keepers and that's that.

(Beat)

Did you want that soup, it's on the stove? You should eat. Let me fix you a bowl.

STEVE: I just don't get why you're so resistant to change/

DAD: I'll take a bowl honey- thanks.

MOM: *(as she is leaving)* Sure thing. How about you Stevey?

STEVE: No -thanks mom.

MOM: Suit yourself. You're practically wasting away! I'll pack some up for you to take home.

DAD waits for **MOM** to get out of earshot
into the kitchen.

DAD: *(whispers loudly)* Stop making waves.

STEVE: Waves? She deserves to have a clean place to live-

DAD: This place is plenty fine.

STEVE: Why didn't you take her to dialysis?

DAD: I did.

STEVE: She said she didn't go.

DAD: She went.

STEVE: Dad, this is serious. You know this is literally life or death.

DAD: You think I don't know that. *(Confesses)* We sat in the car.

STEVE: *(Confused)* What?

DAD: She didn't want to go in.

STEVE: Well, force her!

DAD: Steve- she's been grown for a long time now I'm not about to force her to do anything she doesn't want.

STEVE: She's depressed, she needs a push. You have to push her- did you push her?

MOM: (*calls*) Soups almost ready Eddie. I'm going to grab those crackers you like.

DAD: (*To Mom*) Great dear. (*to STEVE*) I did what I could.

STEVE: Well- it's not enough. I'm going next time - I'll make her do it.

STEVE takes out his phone.

STEVE: When is her next appointment- I'll request off of work.

A long pause as DAD pokes at items in a box.

STEVE: Dad. Did you hear me? It's still 3x a week right? I'm off on Tuesday- so would it be on Tuesday or Wednesday this week? You know what I'll just request both off.

DAD: Don't.

STEVE: Why? Someone has to get her there/

DAD: No.

STEVE: No- what? It's mom- she's stubborn/

DAD: Doc says her heart is too compromised/

STEVE: What? Compromised? When did they say that?

DAD: A few days ago. Keep your voice down - I promised I wouldn't say anything. Her heart is shutting down son- there's no point in having her go through these treatments that just wipe her out-

STEVE: So they fix the heart -

DAD: It's inoperable- long-term side effect of her pacemaker... it's just too weak.
(*breaking the news*)
After all these years the heart is just tired, son.

STEVE: So you're just going to give up! Just like that- one stupid doctor and that's it.

DAD: It's not one son- it's a team. No one is giving up- we're just accepting/

STEVE: Bullshit. We're going to fix up the house like she always wanted/

DAD: Son-cleaning doesn't change reality. I know you feel helpless- but we knew the heart had damage and that we were on borrowed time- forcing change on her now won't

help matters.

STEVE: I just want to give her the life she deserves. She's sacrificed everything for us kids. (*Looks around*) No one even comes around anymore. Maybe if we fix the place up a bit she'll feel a bit better. Maybe her attitude about dialysis would change and she'd have more time/

DAD: She's ok - she understands.

STEVE: Ok?! She still has Tommy's x rays. When was the accident? 1999? She doesn't need all these stupid *things* constantly bringing her down. No wonder she wants to give up.

DAD: You're right- her heart has been through a lot -long before her heart attack. But these things aren't stupid to her/

STEVE: I know. (*Pause*) It's just I lost a part of her when Tommy died and I'm not ready to let the rest of her go Dad.

DAD: I know son. I know- me either.

Just then mom comes back into the living room she sees the two men sharing a tearful embrace.

MOM: Hey Eddie! Come on- your soup will be cold/ (*realizing they are emotional*) Oh, I never knew how sensitive you two were. It's Rhonda. I knew she meant a lot to you. Didn't she?

STEVE: (*covering up*) Yeah mom, *she* was really special.

MOM: Well- I have something to tell you. Your father isn't supposed to know this but come here- I snuck out when Daddy was about to bury her and I brought her in- I couldn't bear the thought of her covered in dirt. She was a part of our family.

MOM walks over to the box and digs underneath all the papers etc and pulls out the shoebox.

MOM: (*Cont.*) Here. (*hurried*) But don't open it!

STEVE: Rhonda?

MOM: Yeah- oh your heart was just broken into a million pieces when she died. So I buried her here - *underneath*- with us- in all these memories.

STEVE: (*Near tears*) Oh mom that's...that's the most disgusting thing I have ever heard.

They all share a laugh.

MOM: I know. It really is- I realize that now that we're talking about it. But in the moment it just felt right. She was important to you so I wanted her with us. These aren't just *things* in a box collecting dust to me- they're life. A life I loved.

DAD and MOM embrace. DAD kisses her forehead.

DAD: You're a better person than I- hun. That's what I love about you.

STEVE: Dad- if Rhonda is in here- what'd you bury by the tree in the back?

DAD: Some empty cans of beer.

MOM: You knew all these years!?

MOM playfully hits DAD in the arm.

DAD: You switched the box with a completely different size box of course I noticed. So - I filled it with some crushed beer cans and well, 'may miller-lite rest their soul.'

MOM: Why didn't you say anything?

DAD: It made you happy. I watched you scurry into the house like you found a treasure. I'd do anything for you Rosie, if this (*gestures to boxes*) makes you happy then I'm happy.

MOM: Thank you- for that.

STEVE: Mom, maybe it's time for *Rhonda* to have some peace.

MOM: Maybe son. I suppose I could part with a few things too.

STEVE: We can sort through things together -

They all settle in to review the contents of the boxes.

MOM: I just don't want to forget anything. I guess more than anything - I don't want to be forgotten.

STEVE: Then we'll treat you like Rhonda but -we're going to need a much bigger box.

MOM: (*Smiles*) Oh you're terrible just terrible. He gets that morbid humor from your

side of the family -you know.

DAD: The boy isn't all wrong Rosie, maybe this stuff is holding us back. I don't want anything to come between us spending time together.

MOM: Me either.

DAD: It would be nice to have the family over again for dinners.

MOM: Guess we could make some room for the grandkids to play.

**STEVE is starting to go back
through the box.**

STEVE: Ok. That's a start.

MOM: But not everything goes.

STEVE: Fair enough. Let's see what we have here- wait. Before we start- can someone warn me if there are any other beloved family pets in any of these boxes?

**MOM comes back to one of the boxes
and starts pulling out memories.**

MOM: Sure honey, I'll try.

(Beat)

Oh, look! A Father's Day card you made for daddy. Geez, you had to be maybe 6 or so. Hand drawn. Not that store-bought crap. (*Passes it to DAD*) Isn't that precious Eddie?

DAD: Oh yeah it's something. A drawing of a tie.

Hold it up as if he was wearing it.

MOM: How thoughtful.

DAD: (*critical*) Polka dots? When have I ever worn polka-dots?

MOM: (*warning*) Eddie.

STEVE: I was a kid dad.

DAD: You had an allowance. We gave you cash money and this is what you do?

MOM: (*Warning*) Eddie be nice.

DAD: Fine. Fine. But I wonder how *he* would've felt if Santa *drew* his Christmas presents.

MOM: Edward!

STEVE: (*laughing*) He's right - it's terrible. I wasn't much of an artist. Why is it so long?

DAD: You also misspelled DAD- not your best work son. I'll start the "throw-away" pile.

STEVE: I'll get the shredder.

They laugh. Mommy grabs the hand-drawn tie and puts it back in the box. They all stare at her. She reaches back in and takes it out.

MOM: Now that I look at it - it's not great dear. Maybe it's time to let go of a few things...Ok. Fine. Let's get rid of it.

STEVE kisses her on the forehead. We see them sitting on the couch sorting through papers laughing and sharing.

-END-