That Picture

a short play that tracks a long marriage

by Jennie Webb

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Characters: **MAN,** to play 30s/40s – 50s/60s

WOMAN, to play 30s/40s – 50s/60s

Setting: A modest home they both feel lucky to call theirs.

Time: The "gone before you know it" present, that spans (nearly) 25 years

Synopsis:

The progression of a couple's marriage is captured through the unpacking of boxes, shifting needs and changing perceptions of a particular moment in time.

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That Picture

We see a man and a woman happy to be in their home. It's a new home. For them. There are a few open boxes in the room, ready to be unpacked. We hear upbeat music, played from a phone or device—maybe a portable radio—and sense that the room is somewhat sparse, undecorated. They are both looking at a framed photo, pulled from a box.

MAN:
I love that picture.

WOMAN:
Me, too.

MAN:
I love that you look… surprised.

WOMAN:
What?

MAN:
In that picture, you look surprised!

WOMAN:
Ha ha. Not happy? Beautiful? Fulfilled? It was our wedding, after all!

MAN:
Of course! All of those things! My beautiful, fulfilled, happily-ever-after wife!

WOMAN:
And right back at you, my husband!

They look at one another, seeing everything they need right now. They kiss.

That was a very good wedding.

MAN:
It was, wasn't it? A night to remember.

WOMAN:
So. *(re the photo)* Where do you think it should go?

MAN:
Up to you. Wherever you think, sweetie.

She looks for the perfect spot; he moves onto the contents of another box.

But you know what I mean, right?

WOMAN:
About what?

MAN:
That picture. In it, you're completely, "I did not see this coming!"

WOMAN:
Marriage?

MAN:
Ha ha, no! Or maybe? I mean—

WOMAN:
(interrupting, re the photo) Ha ha, but you're right! It's true! What were you doing, swooning me?

MAN:
Swooning?

WOMAN:
I don't know. Swooping. Dipping? Dipping me? Is that what it's called?

MAN:
Yes! I took you in my arms, and we dipped into our new life together.

WOMAN:
I think what it was: I thought you might drop me.

MAN:
Well, I didn't!

WOMAN:
Lucky me!

MAN:
And me!

Maybe he gives her a quick kiss as he takes the photo from her. She moves to a new box.

But really: Just look at your face—your beautiful face. In that moment, I caught you completely off guard. You didn't know what was ahead and you had no choice but to trust me.

WOMAN:
Oh, it was definitely a choice. Just don't make me regret it!

Smiling, she takes back the picture.

Let's take care of the last of the boxes, yeah? We're almost done, here.

MAN:
Sure. *(looking into a box)* This one all books?

WOMAN:
I think so. Mostly yours. Do you mind? Taking them downstairs?

MAN:
(picking up the box) Man this is heavy! Who put all those books in here?

WOMAN:
I told you, they're—

MAN:
(interrupting) I know. I was kidding. Ha ha.

WOMAN:
Ha ha ha. Right…

They both smile as he carries the box out of the room. She sets the photo in place. And something shifts. A wooden chair appears, or the woman pulls it from a box. She sits. She seems to have settled. We get the sense that more furniture and objects have found places around the room. We hear the sound of what is probably a TV. She assesses the contents of a new box and might produce an empty black trash bag.

You know something, honey? We really should have… culled better before we packed. Before we moved in.

MAN:
(offstage) What?

WOMAN:
Gone through stuff! I mean, look at all of this: It's been 10, almost 11 years! We should have gotten rid of stuff before we put it into boxes, before we moved in!

MAN:
(offstage) We?

WOMAN:
What?

The man comes back into the room. His hairline may have receded.

MAN:
Are you talking we? Or me?

WOMAN:
Well, if you want to get technical…

MAN:
You can be very sneaky, sweetie, but I'm onto you.

WOMAN:
I'll try to remember that! *(re box's contents)* So I can toss all of this?

MAN:
What? No! There's some great stuff in there!

WOMAN:
Stuff that you've happily lived without for over a decade?

MAN:
Ha ha how do you know it's "happily?"

He pulls a souvenir from the box.

Oh, man! Look! Remember, from when we were first dating? Where was this?

OMAN:
Downstairs. In that box since we first—

MAN:
(interrupting) But I mean, it's like a time capsule! Who knows what's in here?

WOMAN:
Exactly! So let's just get rid of it. It's full of junk!

MAN:
To you, maybe!

WOMAN:
Honey. You packed up your place right before got married in, like, half-an-hour. Look: There are 15-year-old bills in there! Not to mention photos of all your ex—

MAN:
(interrupting, picking up a photo) And check this out! What a handsome devil!

WOMAN:
Very handsome.

MAN:
(finding tapes or discs) Oh my god: My tunes! Do we even have a player, anymore?

WOMAN:
No no no no no—we're supposed to be de-cluttering! All the stuff that's… collected in this house. I feel like we're ready for a new chapter, a clean slate, don't you?

MAN:
So you want to get rid of everything?

WOMAN:
No, not—

MAN:
(interrupting) You want to get rid of me?

WOMAN:
What? No! Where did that come from?

MAN:
I'm just kidding. I mean, I get it. I have a lot of… artifacts. From over the years. I hang onto stuff. So what's wrong with that? For me, it's all about the memories.

WOMAN:
Ex-girlfriend memories?

MAN:
Well, that's part of my past, right? We weren't kids when we got married. We both have pasts. But I'm talking about *our* memories, too. Our past. I mean, that chair. You wanted to buy it when we were away for some anniversary?

WOMAN:
Our 5th. Wood.

MAN:
Right! And even that!

He gestures to an odd figure or sculpture of some sort, now revealed on display.

That… whatever it is. I found it at a yard sale a couple of years ago?

WOMAN:
Hah! It was right after my mom died. It made me laugh.

MAN:
I thought you hated it.

WOMAN:
No! I mean, it's weird. But it made me laugh. That you bought it, brought it to me all proud seemed so… I loved that. And at that point, I really needed to laugh.

MAN:
Then it was a good move, my lavish purchase! I'm glad I could be of service.

WOMAN:
It was good. Thank you.

MAN:
So you get what I mean? It's not just "stuff." You're all clean slate, but I look around this house, and I see this and that and everything adds up to our life together.

WOMAN:
Oh, that is sweet. Our… journey!

MAN:
Right! *(pointing)* Like that picture!

WOMAN:
Our wedding picture?

MAN:
I love that picture.

WOMAN:
Funny how something's just there for years and you forget to…

She takes the photo from its place.

Yow. Look at my hair. It's like a helmet!

MAN:
And look at mine! I had a whole lot more!

WOMAN:
Ha ha. Other things, a whole lot less—both of us! But you know what? *(re his current appearance, or maybe something more)* I'm really liking *this*, right now!

MAN:
Why, thank you! I feel the same!

They both smile. Maybe they kiss and are back on track. He takes the picture from her.

There's something about you, in this picture, though. Something I've always… Look at your face. So cute. You look… disturbed.

WOMAN:
Disturbed?

MAN:
Or maybe annoyed? That look. When I grabbed you? You didn't think I had it in me? I held you tight, then bent you over and—

WOMAN:
(interrupting) I wasn't annoyed; I'm smiling!

MAN:
Well, under that smile…

WOMAN:
What are you talking about? I was delighted; that was a really wonderful day!

MAN:
Sure, sure, but in that moment, you were kinda— I mean, it was not what you expected.

WOMAN:
No. It wasn't, but—

MAN:
(interrupting) You do know it's like you've always got everything figured out, straight forward, never looking back and if things don't go the way you think they should—

WOMAN:
(interrupting) What? That's not fair! I don't always—

MAN:
(interrupting) No. You're right! You're absolutely right. I'm sorry!

He hands the photo back to her and returns to the boxes.

But if we're going to start a new chapter, I'm taking these downstairs.

WOMAN:
Wait. I don't understand what just—!

MAN:
(interrupting) It's all good! I just need to go through them. Love you!

Stacking the boxes on top of one another, he heads out of the room.

WOMAN:
Okay… And you!

She looks again at the photo, then puts it back in its place. Or maybe she puts it in a new place. Something shifts. She shakes it off and we might hear classical music. Complicated jazz. Music that takes effort. There's a different energy in the room that she's not used to. And the open boxes around her give off different vibes.

Hey. Are these ready to be sealed up?

MAN:
(offstage) What are "these?"

WOMAN:
These boxes.

MAN:
(offstage) Which—

WOMAN:
(interrupting) Any of them! All of them! I don't—

MAN:
(interrupting, offstage) Hang on. I'm coming…

The woman takes a roll of sealing tape from one of the boxes. The man comes into the room with a dolly holding sealed boxes. He might have considerably less hair.

MAN:
I think this is the last of it.

WOMAN:
Great. I was asking if—

MAN:
(interrupting) These boxes need sealing.

WOMAN:
I… Here.

She gives him the tape.

MAN:
Thanks. The guys are coming tomorrow early. You're okay with that?

WOMAN:
Do I have a choice?

MAN:
Um, that was mean.

WOMAN:
I'm sorry. It was. I'm just… Early's fine. You like your new place?

MAN:
It's okay. It's an apartment. Not the house I've lived in for 25 years, but…

WOMAN:
24.

MAN:
Almost 25.

WOMAN:
Is there anything else you need?

MAN:
As in?

WOMAN:
I don't— For the apartment. More kitchen stuff? Or furniture? Or—

MAN:
(interrupting) No. I'm good. I'm leaving you that chair. One of the thingies is broken.

He seals a box.

WOMAN:
Right. But it's still good. We fixed it, remember? That was a great trip, when we got it. We went up to—?

MAN:
(interrupting) Ah! But I am taking… This!

He picks up the weird figure.

WOMAN:
Oh! I love that!

MAN:
But it's mine. I bought it.

WOMAN:
Yeah, at a yard sale. I always thought you bought it for…

The man puts it in an open box.

Okay.

MAN:
Okay.

He seals the box. Then points to the wedding photo.

And what about that? You know I love that picture.

WOMAN:
I do. Can I make you a copy?

MAN:
Do we have the negative?

WOMAN:
Negative? No, I can scan it. Oh! My mom had a copy! It's in a box downstairs?

MAN:
You didn't give it away?

WOMAN:
Why would I give it away?

MAN:
I don't know. The frame? You're always wanting to get rid of everything.

WOMAN:
I— Maybe. But the photo's got to be somewhere. I wouldn't have—

MAN:
No?

WOMAN:
I don't think?

MAN:
It's a great shot. I love how you look in it. You look… scared.

WOMAN:
What?

MAN:
It's like, I've got my arms around you and the look on your face: You look terrified!

WOMAN:
I don't—

MAN:
(interrupting) You do! Scared to death! Like you're—

WOMAN:
(interrupting) That's what you see or that's what you want to see? Want me to see?

MAN:
What are you talking about?

WOMAN:
That picture.

MAN:
I know! But I never know what you mean when you get like—

WOMAN:
(interrupting) Or was that a joke? Why would you want to remember me, when we were having such a lovely time, as if I was…?

A suspended moment, then she removes the picture from its place and hands it to him.

You know what? Take it.

MAN:
Really?

WOMAN:
Absolutely. It's all yours.

They look at one another. And take each other in. Before they head in different directions.

End of Play