

BOX STEPS

By Alan Haehnel

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BOX STEPS

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A Full Length Comedy/Drama

BY ALAN HAEHNEL

SYNOPSIS: *Box Steps* comprises 10 ten-minute plays, all linked by a set piece: a refrigerator box. In each play, the box changes--first its position on the stage, then eventually its shape until it is nothing but a bunch of cardboard confetti littered on the stage floor. Each ten-minute play employs a small cast from 2 to 5, but actors could easily play multiple roles. The plays vary in style and tone, but all explore the elements of imagination and possibility.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5-27 total cast, 1-3 extras, gender flexible, doubling possible)

PLAY ONE: BY ANY OTHER NAME

CARA (f) A no-nonsense type *(97 lines)*
DAWN (f) A creative type *(96 lines)*

Both characters could range in age from 12-25. Contemporary costumes.

PLAY TWO: SPIRIT BOX

JESSIE (f) Teenaged Older sister *(69 lines)*
MARK (m) Teenaged Older brother
(68 lines)

EXTRA:

LAURA (f) Younger sister, about age 6

Contemporary costumes.

PLAY THREE: YOUR WORSHIP

- SAM (m)..... Believes himself the ultimate salesman (*64 lines*)
- DON (m)..... Friends with Sam, dubious of Sam's salesmanship (*17 lines*)
- ETHAN (m)..... Sincere passerby (*44 lines*)
- DANA (f)..... Cynical passerby (*46 lines*)
- SAUNDRA (f)..... Another passerby (*25 lines*)

All characters could range in age from 15-40. Contemporary costumes.

PLAY FOUR: THE DISAPPEARING LADY

- MARCUS (m)..... A would-be magician, in love with Sarah (*108 lines*)
- SARAH (f)..... Marcus's friend, consenting to be his assistant (*106 lines*)

Both characters could range in age from 15-30. Contemporary costumes. Marcus might wear a typical magician's hat or some other accouterment.

PLAY 5: OWNED

- MARY (f)..... A martial arts instructor, anywhere from age 18-30 (*67 lines*)
- PHIL (m)..... A creep, anywhere from age 20-50 (*66 lines*)

Contemporary costumes.

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PLAY SIX: PARK FLIGHT

- HENDERSON (m)..... Amateur pilot, circa 1920
(50 lines)
- ANGELA (f)..... Henderson's girlfriend, circa
1920 (52 lines)
- GINA (m/f) Concerned citizen, present day
(26 lines)

Henderson and Angela's costumes should be period. Gina's should be contemporary.

PLAY SEVEN: MAKE YOUR PRESENTS KNOWN

- MINDY (f)..... Head techie (53 lines)
- JAKE (m)..... Techie, bit of a joker (62 lines)
- MO (m/f)..... Techie, asks too many
questions (53 lines)

EXTRAS:

- HENDERSON Dead body from previous play
- ANGELA Dead body from previous play

All three characters could range in age from 14-30. Contemporary costumes, typical black for techies.

PLAY EIGHT: ROBBIE'S BIRTHDAY

- ROBBIE (m)..... An autistic boy, age 14-17
(76 lines)
- CAROLE (f)..... Robbie's sister, age 16-20
(81 lines)

Contemporary costumes.

PLAY NINE: WHAT IS NEEDED

DARCY (f)..... The stable sister in the family
(71 lines)

CARMEN (f) The renegade sister (71 lines)

Both characters could range in age from 16-25. Contemporary costumes.

PLAY TEN: FALLEN JUNIPER

SAM (m/f)..... A student who is also a part-time janitor (50 lines)

LILY (m/f) Assistant to Tanya (41 lines)

TANYA (m/f) Assistant to Juniper (34 lines)

JUNIPER (m/f) A highly eccentric, fabulously famous sculptor (18 lines)

Sam, Lily and Tanya could range in age from 18-40. Juniper could range in age from 30-70. All dress in contemporary outfits, but Juniper's costume should be eclectic, colorful and outrageous.

PRODUCTION NOTE

One of the central themes of *Box Steps* is creativity. The cardboard box is an icon for this idea: How many stories exist of children ignoring a gift and creating a toy out of the box it came in? I recommend, then, that productions of *Box Steps* be staged very simply. A few chairs, perhaps, but mainly just the actors, the story and, in its various iterations...The Box.

PLAY 1: BY ANY OTHER NAME

AT RISE: *Lights up on a refrigerator box, center stage. CARA enters.*

CARA: What's this doing here?

She pushes against it, sees that's it's empty. She shrugs, starts to leave. DAWN enters from the other side of the stage.

DAWN: Hello, what have we here?

CARA: Just a big box. Don't know what it's doing here. Nothing in it.

DAWN: I love things like this.

CARA: "Things like this"? What are you talking about? It's a box.

DAWN: It's the picture of possibility.

CARA: Oh, don't start.

DAWN: Don't start what?

CARA: Don't start in with your "Ooh, how wonderful and full of wonder life is."

DAWN: Life is wonderful and full of wonder, though I don't tend to be so redundantly repetitive as that.

CARA: What?

DAWN: "Wonderful" means "full of wonder."

CARA: I know.

DAWN: And "redundant" means "repetitive," so I was just making a joke about...

CARA: I get the joke!

DAWN: Excellent. (*Regarding the box.*) A tower of dreams!

CARA: You know what? Stop. I mean it.

DAWN: Stop what? What "it" do you mean?

CARA: I'm sick of it, Dawn. Really. I think, to be honest, it's...dangerous.

DAWN: Dangerous.

CARA: Yes.

DAWN: Dangerous?

CARA: You heard me!

DAWN: You are warning me of some danger.

CARA: Yes!

DAWN: Thank-you. That means you care. But, just for the sake of a tiny bit of clarification, just what danger are you warning me of? Is there something in this box I don't know about?

CARA: No. There is nothing in this box you don't know about. There is nothing...

DAWN: Have you looked?

CARA: At what?

DAWN: In the box?

CARA: No. I just...I pushed it, and it was very light, so obviously, there was nothing in it.

DAWN: We should look.

CARA: Go ahead and look.

DAWN: Box, I am going to look in you! Prepare yourself to be looked into!

CARA: Cut it out!

DAWN: What?

CARA: That's just what I'm talking about, the dangerous part. You don't talk to a box.

DAWN: I don't.

CARA: No. Because a box is a box and it doesn't have ears to hear you and it doesn't have a brain to process what you're saying and it doesn't have a mouth to answer you, so you don't talk to a box.

DAWN: You don't or you shouldn't?

CARA: Same thing.

DAWN: Not really. Because I did talk to the box, so saying I don't is...not really true. Because I did. Saying I shouldn't...that's a whole other matter. That's maybe getting into the "daaangeeer" thing you were talking about before.

CARA: You know what? Forget it. I'm leaving.

DAWN: Okay, 'bye! *(CARA walks away, but not totally offstage. She watches as DAWN tips the box down so she can look into it—the box is only open on the top.)* Box, do not be afraid. I am going to look in you now, but I am not...ah! *(She lets go of the box so it stands upright again.)* There's something in there.

CARA: No, there's not.

DAWN: Oh, I thought you had left. Didn't you say you were leaving?

CARA: There's nothing in the box.

DAWN: There most certainly is. Do you want to see?

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CARA: No, I don't want to see.

DAWN: You really should see this.

CARA: Okay, fine, but I'm just going to warn you...

DAWN: More danger?

CARA: Yeah, more danger. If I look in that box and there's nothing in there...

DAWN: There is.

CARA: If there's nothing in there, I'm going to be very angry.

DAWN: And that's dangerous.

CARA: Yes! I am already at the end of my patience, so, yes, me angry is dangerous. Are you sure you want me to look?

DAWN: Do you think you can handle it?

CARA: I'm pretty sure I'll be fine.

DAWN: Here, I'll tip it down for you. (*DAWN tips the box down. Cara opens the flaps to look in it.*) See, I told you.

CARA: (*Disgustedly putting the box back to its upright position.*) And I told you, didn't I?

DAWN: Are you angry?

CARA: Yes! Yes, I am angry because there is nothing in the box!

DAWN: There is—didn't you see it?

CARA: Dawn, you are not funny.

DAWN: Actually, when I'm around people, they make this strange sound with their mouths that some call laughter. So I am funny.

CARA: No, you are annoying. Which also makes me angry.

DAWN: Did it ever occur to you that a lot of things make you angry?

CARA: There is nothing in that box! I told you there was nothing in that box! And I told you not to show me the nothing in that box because it would make me angry but you went ahead and did it, didn't you, just to make me angry?

DAWN: There is something in that box.

CARA: What?

DAWN: Air.

CARA: Air is nothing.

DAWN: Oh, I don't know about that. If I put you in that box and sealed it all up with duct tape and plastic and then I hooked up a vacuum tube and pulled all the air out of it, then I think you would pretty quickly think that air was something.

CARA: Why am I bothering?

DAWN: I don't know; why are you?

CARA: I'm just leaving.

DAWN: You tried that before.

CARA: No, I'm not leaving. Do you know why not?

DAWN: You secretly love me and can't live without me? And my pet box?

CARA: That is why I'm not leaving.

DAWN: Wow—you do love me and my pet box?

CARA: No! Dawn.

DAWN: Cara.

CARA: Things just are what they are, okay?

DAWN: (*Whispering to the box.*) Are you catching this? Things just are what they are. Whew, deep! (*CARA, clearly frustrated, stares at DAWN.*) Keep going. We're listening.

CARA: You're listening.

DAWN: Yes.

CARA: You're the only one here.

DAWN: Yes—me and my...

CARA: Stop!

DAWN: I'm stopped.

CARA: You were about to say something about the box. You were going to call it your pet or your uncle or...

DAWN: Do you really think he looks like my uncle?

CARA: I'm serious, Dawn.

DAWN: So am I. I do see some resemblance around the flaps...

CARA: Dawn, for the last time, cut...it...out! No more jokes! Please!

DAWN: Okay. I can see this matters to you.

CARA: Yes. Thank-you. It does.

DAWN: I don't know why it matters, but it does.

CARA: I'm trying to explain that. Look, you're the funny one.

DAWN: We're not just talking about looks, right?

CARA: (*Warning.*) Dawn.

DAWN: Oh, right, this matters, be serious, sorry.

CARA: You're the joker, the life of the party, all that.

DAWN: If you say so.

CARA: Really. Everybody likes hanging out with Dawn. "She's so fun to be around," people say. "She's brightens up the day."

DAWN: Oh, you're going to make me blush.

CARA: Believe it or not, I'm not complimenting you right now.

DAWN: Oh, right—being enjoyable is a bad thing. I forgot.

CARA: It's not a bad thing. It can, though, if it's taken too far, be a dangerous thing.

DAWN: Are we talking dangerous...jealousy, by any chance?

CARA: No. I am not jealous.

DAWN: You're sure? Because old Boxie and I, we don't think you have any...

CARA: You see—you see right there, that's the point...again!

DAWN: (*To the box.*) Can't talk right now. BRB, Boxie. What's the point again?

CARA: The basis of all your humor, all your fun, is that you claim things are what they are not.

DAWN: Okay.

CARA: And I worry that you do it so often that you—you're losing the capacity to deal with what is real and true and just...there!

DAWN: So. What is real is what is true is what is there? Is that what you're saying?

CARA: Yeah.

DAWN: So this "there-ness, truth-ness, real-ness"--how do we judge that?

CARA: You're trying to turn this into a joke again.

DAWN: I'm not! I'm not talking to the box; I'm not claiming my pants have teeth, though they are kind of biting into my waist a little; I'm not pretending that you find me so attractive you can hardly keep your hands off me. That isn't a problem is it? Because I can get a Taser.

CARA: But you were using "there-ness" and "truth-ness" as if they were words.

DAWN: Well, they are words.

CARA: No, they're not. You can't find them in the dictionary.

DAWN: So a word isn't a word until it's in the dictionary? What were human beings using before there were dictionaries? Vulcan mind melds?

CARA: I feel like you're just trying to get me off track, that's all.

DAWN: Cara, I am not trying to get you off track. You say I don't see things as they really are. You say I may be missing the truth. You say that is dangerous.

CARA: Potentially, yes. I mean, what if somebody decided this box was a car and took it out on the highway?

DAWN: Well, as long as they signal when making a lane change, I don't see the problem.

CARA: There you go again!

DAWN: Look, you can't lob something like that at a funny girl and not expect her to swing. Come on!

CARA: You're missing my point.

DAWN: I am not missing your point. I am trying to clarify your point. Let's go back to my question: How do you judge what is real and true and there? And do real and true and there mean the same thing?

CARA: Real and there do. Truth—that's a separate deal.

DAWN: All right, so be it. How do you judge if something is real?

CARA: Through your senses.

DAWN: Taste, touch, sight, sound, smell. The big five.

CARA: Right.

DAWN: So, this box is real. I can touch it. (*She touches it.*) Boink. I can see it. Brown, big, two feet away. Yup. I can taste it. (*She puts her tongue on it.*) Tangy, with just a slight hint of smoky vanilla.

CARA: Don't!

DAWN: Right. Just the facts. I tasted the box. It had a taste. It tasted like box. Box taste.

CARA: Keep going.

DAWN: I can smell it. What is that cologne, Boxman--Midnight Cardboard?

CARA: You can't help yourself, can you?

DAWN: I can hear...no, wait. I can't hear it. I cannot hear the box! Does that mean it's not there? If a box is in a room and no one can hear it, does that mean it's not there?

CARA: You're making fun of me.

DAWN: No, I'm not. I'm just going through the catalog of the senses and I got hung up on sound. This box is not real! I cannot hear it! Begone, box, for thou art merely an illusion.

CARA: Obviously, and I can't believe I'm even going to waste words on explaining this, a thing doesn't have to be perceived through all the senses to be real.

DAWN: Ah! So four out of five will suffice?

CARA: Yes.

DAWN: Thank goodness! I thought I'd lost you for a minute there,
Box my friend.

CARA: Dawn, this is a box. It is not your friend. It is not a tower of
possibility. It is not a space shuttle.

DAWN: Well, I never claimed that...

CARA: But you would have if we stood around here long enough.

DAWN: Fair enough.

CARA: We can prove, through our senses, that this is a real, here,
actual box. But that is all.

DAWN: That's all?

CARA: All.

DAWN: And it's dangerous if I say it's anything more than that? If I
claim it just made a pass at me, for instance. *(To the box.)* Hey,
Buddy, you may smell nice, but that's no excuse for that kind of
behavior. *(To CARA.)* That was dangerous, what I just did.

CARA: You do it all the time. That's the dangerous part. You have to
acknowledge things for what they are, really and truly
and...verifiably.

DAWN: Hm.

CARA: What?

DAWN: Well, I was just thinking.

CARA: I hear another joke coming.

DAWN: Really? What does the sound of a joke coming sound like? A
mosquito buzz? An alarm clock? A whoopie cushion?

CARA: I wasn't being literal.

DAWN: Then you weren't being real, right? Never mind. I wasn't
joking, anyway. I was thinking about my grandmother. Grammy
Peaches.

CARA: Peaches?

DAWN: Yeah. Her name was actually Purchase, but we all called her
Grammy Peaches. She told us to. "Better to be a fruit than a
financial transaction," she used to say.

CARA: Why were you thinking of her?

DAWN: Well, I was one of only three grandkids, so she spent a lot of time with us. You think I joke? My parents say I got it from her. Nothing was *ever* just the thing itself with her. This box...she would have had us rowing across the Atlantic in it, sledding down a glacier, blasting to the moon, battling dinosaurs.... Me and her used to spend hours playing with boxes and other things like this.

CARA: She sounds like a nice woman.

DAWN: Understatement of the century. She was the nicest.

CARA: Was?

DAWN: She died a month ago.

CARA: I'm sorry.

DAWN: Thanks. Near the end, she lost her mind. Reality? I remember this one time we were talking to her, and she was sure that my dad was her husband, Grampa Ralph, who died before I was born. She kept saying things like, "Ralphie, where have you been? I expected you home three days ago." My Uncle Jack, he hated it. He kept telling her that Dad was Bruce, her son, not Grampa Ralph. They got in an argument about it! It was crazy. Grammy Peaches was getting all agitated, and Uncle Jack just couldn't let it go.

CARA: What about your dad?

DAWN: He was fine, talking to Grammy as if he was her husband. You couldn't talk her out of it, anyway. He figured there was no harm to it, but Uncle Jack—he just insisted. Kind of like you and this box, I guess. Dad was Bruce, his brother, and it didn't matter that his mother's mind was gone—Uncle Jack just had to tell her what was really real. It was an awful scene, this whispered battle.

CARA: It sounds awful.

DAWN: Yeah. I mean, she wasn't like that for long, just near the very end. We were super close. She took me to see her casket.

CARA: Really? That's weird.

DAWN: Not for Grammy Peaches. She told me, "Dawn, do you know what this pretty box is?" "What?" I said. She said, "This is my railroad car to heaven."

CARA: That's nice.

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DAWN: Yeah. Yeah. That's what I kept telling myself during the funeral: "Grammy Peaches is taking her railroad car to heaven." I had to believe that. I still believe that. If someone came and took away that unreality, if you want to call it that, I...don't know what I'd do. So, when you say that you think it's dangerous that I'm always making things into what they're not and maybe missing out on what's real, I guess...I guess I worry more about the danger of seeing things just as they are and missing out on what's possible.

CARA: Whoa. That's deep.

DAWN: Yeah, I should probably make that my Facebook status or something. Too late; I already forgot it. Anyway, I've gotta run. I'm checking out this sporty little cardboard box. I'm going to take it out on the highway and see what that baby can do!

CARA: Cute.

DAWN: And very dangerous. See you later, alligator. I mean, until we meet again, my friend Cara, who I can see, hear, touch, smell and taste. Which all sounds pretty weird now that I say it, but don't get any ideas. 'Bye!

CARA: 'Bye. (*DAWN exits. CARA stands for a moment, thinking. She glances at the box, speaks to it.*) What are you looking at?

CARA exits. The lights come down.

PLAY TWO: SPIRIT BOX

PRODUCTION NOTE: *“Spirit Box” is mainly a light, playful piece, but it needs to take a serious turn at the point when LAURA claims, via her one-knock, two-knock communication, that she is dead. LAURA is not a morbid child; she is simply telling a dark joke and expressing a natural child’s curiosity about death. This shift of tone, though, allows us to explore JESSIE’S sadness over the recent loss of her horse. Care should be taken to let the character’s relationships deepen in this final section of the play.*

AT RISE: *A young girl, LAURA, enters, looking around for a place to hide. Off-stage, we hear her older brother and sister—MARK and JESSIE—calling for LAURA, trying to find her. LAURA sees the box, tips it over, gets into it, then lifts it back up so it’s upright again, with her underneath. JESSIE enters just in time to see LAURA slipping under the box, but she pretends that she still doesn’t know where her little sister is.*

JESSIE: Laura, where did you go? *(She waves to MARK offstage, getting him to enter. As she talks, she points to the box. He nods, understanding that Laura is hiding there.)* Come on, you have to come out now. I don’t know, Mark. I have no idea where she went.

MARK: You’ve got to be kidding me. Mom and Dad will kill us if we can’t find her.

JESSIE: Hey, it’s not our fault. We were just playing a game. How were we supposed to know she was so good at it?

MARK: Where do you think she took off to?

JESSIE: I have no idea. She’s so quick, she could be in Antarctica by now.

MARK: Or Africa. Or Toledo.

JESSIE: Oh, I give up.

MARK: What do you mean? You’re not even going to try to find her anymore?

JESSIE: Why bother? I’ll tell you what, Mark—if Laura doesn’t want to be found, Laura is not going to be found. I’m just going to sit here by this box and give up. This is me, giving up.

MARK: I guess you’re right. What’s the use?

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JESSIE: Hey, what's this box doing here, anyway?

MARK: I don't know. It looks like a drum to me. I think it's a drumming box.

JESSIE: A drumming box? How does that work?

MARK: It's simple. You just drum on it. Like this. *(He drums on the outside of the box, lightly.)* See? It's got some nice tone to it.

JESSIE: Whoa, can I try that?

MARK: Be my guest. A drumming box can handle multiple users, no problem.

JESSIE and MARK both start drumming on the box.

JESSIE: Hey, you know, this is great!

MARK: Isn't it? The thing that's nice is you can drum high, or you can drum low, or you can drum...

LAURA has had enough. She hits the box from the inside, one loud thump. JESSIE and MARK jump away, acting surprised.

JESSIE: What was that? Did you do that?

MARK: How could I do that? That sounded like it came from *inside* the box.

JESSIE: How could that happen?

MARK: You don't suppose...no!

JESSIE: What? What are you thinking, Mark?

MARK: Well, I've heard of these things called Spirit Boxes, but...no, this couldn't be one of those. We must have just been imagining things, thinking that we heard a noise from this box.

JESSIE: You're right. We'd probably better go see if we can find Laura, even if she has gone to Antarctica.

THEY move away from the box, pretending to leave.

MARK: You look in Antarctica; I'll check out Toledo.

JESSIE: Yup, we'd better go.

MARK: Okay, I'll meet you back home in a few weeks. Dress warm!

JESSIE: Okay! I'll see you...

LAURA pounds on the box from the inside again, one thump.

MARK: I definitely heard something that time!

JESSIE: So did I!

MARK: Maybe this really is one of those spirit boxes. They're very rare.

JESSIE: How do they work?

MARK: Well, you ask it a question.

JESSIE: Like what is the capital of New Jersey?

MARK: No, no—a yes/no question. And if this spirit box operates like I've heard they do, it'll produce one knocking sound for yes and two knocking sounds for no.

JESSIE: Should we try it?

MARK: I think we should.

JESSIE: Do we have anything to lose?

MARK: Maybe some dignity, but that's it.

JESSIE: I'm willing to risk it. You ask first.

MARK: No, you—by all means.

JESSIE: Box, are you a Spirit Box? (*No sound.*) I guess it's not.

MARK: Box, are you sure you're not a... (*LAURA knocks once.*) It is! It's a Spirit Box! Did you hear that?

JESSIE: Wait a minute! How do we know? How do we know that it's really a Spirit Box and not just, say, some kid in there trying to fool us?

MARK: Well, ask!

JESSIE: Is there some kid inside this box trying to fool us into thinking this is a Spirit Box? (*After a pause, LAURA knocks twice.*) Wow! I'm convinced!

MARK: So am I! Do you know what this means? Do you?

JESSIE: Our dignity is completely gone?

MARK: Well, besides that—do you know what else this means?

JESSIE: I have no idea.

MARK: This means we have found the source of all wisdom. A Spirit Box can tell us anything we could possibly want to know.

JESSIE: In the whole universe?

MARK: In the whole entire universe.

JESSIE: In the whole galaxy?

MARK: The galaxy wide.

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JESSIE: Even across the town?

MARK: Up one side of the town and down the other. Ask the Spirit Box anything...

JESSIE: Spirit Box, what is the capital of New Jersey?

MARK: No, no, no! Yes or no questions, remember?

JESSIE: Oh, that's right. Spirit Box, is the capital of New Jersey...tomato soup?

Two knocks.

MARK: You were just testing it, weren't you?

JESSIE: I have to admit, I was.

MARK: Spirit Box, do you like being tested with questions like that?

Two knocks.

JESSIE: Sorry, Spirit Box. Do you accept my apology?

Two knocks.

MARK: You're in trouble now.

JESSIE: Spirit Box, will you ever forgive me? (*One knock.*) Oh, thank goodness. How soon?

MARK: Yes or no questions, Jess—come on! Get with it!

JESSIE: Oh, right, right, right.

MARK: Spirit Box, if Jess here—who is a little slow, we all have to admit—asks you a legitimate question, will you forgive her? (*One knock.*) There you go.

JESSIE: All right, Spirit Box. Is the capital of New Jersey...

MARK: What's with the capital of New Jersey thing? Maybe the Spirit Box doesn't know..

JESSIE: Oh, I bet the Spirit Box has recently studied things like capitals of the states, don't you worry. Besides, it knows everything, right?

MARK: Right, of course!

JESSIE: Is the capital of New Jersey...Jersey City? (*Two knocks.*) How about...Trenton? (*One knock.*) Ah-ha!

MARK: (*Whispered.*) Is that right?

JESSIE: Of course that's right, Mark! You've studied the capitals of the states—you should know that's right! Spirit Box, is my brother, Mark Johnstone, not very bright?

One knock.

MARK: Wait a second, wait a second—I don't like the way you phrased that question. It could easily get confusing. The answer could mean, yes, he is bright or yes, he's not very bright. It's got a kind of double negative in there or something.

JESSIE: Spirit Box, do you think my brother, Mark Johnstone, is dumb?

One knock.

MARK: Hey, come on! I'm not dumb!

Another knock.

JESSIE: What was that?

MARK: That was the second knock. It was a late addition; the answer to the last question was “no, I am not dumb.”

JESSIE: Spirit Box, did you just pause between knocks so what sounded like “yes” was actually “no”?

One knock.

MARK: See? What did I tell you?

JESSIE: I'm taking it as a “maybe.” Spirit Box, isn't it shameful that my brother Mark doesn't remember the capitals of the states even though he learned them once?

An emphatic single knock.

MARK: Okay, okay, fine. I'm sure you don't remember them all, either.

JESSIE: You mean, you're sure that I don't remember that the capital of Alabama is Montgomery, the capital of Alaska is Juneau, the capital of Arizona is Phoenix...

MARK: Enough. Good. You're a genius of state capitals, but you're also a show off.

JESSIE: It's basic knowledge.

MARK: Spirit Box, is my sister Jessie a show-off? (*An emphatic double knock. JESSIE gives MARK an "I-told-you-so" grin.*) Spirit Box, have you forgiven Jessie yet? (*Single knock.*) Sheesh. Thanks a lot, S.B. Last time I'll discover one of you.

JESSIE: Spirit Box, are you and I best friends?

Two knocks.

MARK: Don't get over-confident there, Pal. North Dakota!

JESSIE: Bismarck.

MARK: Maybe. (*One knock.*) Hey, no butting in, Spirit Box!

JESSIE: So tell me, Spirit Box, is there life on other planets?

One knock.

MARK: Are the aliens from other planets more intelligent than we are? (*One knock.*) And if, Spirit Box, aliens from another planet came down to invade Earth and they abducted my sister Jessie and had to decide if they would destroy our planet based on whether or not they found her a highly intelligent creature, would Jessie's level of smartness save Earth from alien destruction? (*Pause. Then two knocks.*) Sorry, Jess—you know all the capitals but you can't save the planet.

JESSIE: Ha, ha. Wait a minute, what are we doing?

MARK: What?

JESSIE: We have the Spirit Box here—it knows everything, right?

MARK: Naturally.

JESSIE: Then it must know where Laura is!

MARK: My gosh, golly, gee willikers, you're right!

JESSIE: Spirit Box, do you know what happened to our little sister Laura?

One knock.

MARK: Is she in Antarctica?

Two knocks.

JESSIE: Africa?

Two knocks.

MARK: Toledo? (*Multiple knocks.*) What does that mean?

JESSIE: Maybe it means the Spirit Box is getting sick of these dumb guesses.

MARK: Spirit Box, does lots of knocks mean you're getting sick of dumb guesses?

One knock.

JESSIE: Got it. Spirit Box, is Laura okay?

One knock.

MARK: Is she near us?

Two knocks.

JESSIE: Is she alone?

One knock.

MARK: Is she lonely?

Two knocks.

JESSIE: Is she in a dark place?

One knock.

MARK: Is she afraid?

Two knocks.

JESSIE: Spirit Box already said she was okay—if she was afraid, she wouldn't be okay.

MARK: Hey, I was just checking. This isn't 20 questions—we don't have a limit.

JESSIE: Spirit Box, is Laura alive?

MARK: What kind of a...*(Two knocks. JESSIE and MARK look at one another, puzzled and a bit frightened.)* Is Laura dead?

One knock.

JESSIE: So Laura is dead but she's okay?

One knock.

MARK: Is Laura going to stay dead?

One knock, pause, then another knock.

JESSIE: Well, that's good. Say, Spirit Box, while Laura is dead, would it be all right if her older sister Jessie borrowed her brand-new computer? *(Two knocks.)* Just for a little while?

Two knocks.

MARK: Can't get anything past a Spirit Box, I'm telling you.

JESSIE: Spirit Box, is Prancer there?

MARK: Jess.

One knock.

JESSIE: Can you see her, Spirit Box?

MARK: She said it's dark.

One knock.

JESSIE: What's she doing?

MARK: Jess, why are you...?

JESSIE: Is there a big field there? Is she running around like she used to, before she got sick? Is she kicking her legs and snorting for somebody to come give her an apple?

One knock.

MARK: If we go home—if her brother and her sister go home—will Laura come alive again soon and come back home, too?

One knock.

JESSIE: Will Prancer stay dead? *(Pause.)* Spirit Box, will Prance...*(One knock.)* Is she safe there with you, Spirit Box?

One knock.

MARK: Spirit Box, can you communicate with Laura? *(One knock.)* Can you tell her that Mark and Jessie miss her? *(One knock.)* Thanks, Spirit Box. Will you tell her? *(One knock.)* Thanks.

JESSIE: And will you tell Prancer that Jessie loves her and misses her, too?

One knock.

MARK: Come on, Jess. Jess? What's the capital of Vermont? Vermontville? *(Two knocks.)* Greenland?

Two knocks.

JESSIE: Montpelier.

One knock.

MARK: Good. Let's go.

BOX STEPS

JESS rises and starts to exit with MARK.

JESSIE: Spirit Box, will you tell Laura to stop being dead and to come home soon?

Multiple knocks, impatient. MARK and JESSIE exit. After a long pause, LAURA lifts up the box, peeks under to see that her siblings have left, then puts it back down. After another long pause, the lights go down to end the play.

Do Not Copy

PLAY THREE: YOUR WORSHIP

PRODUCTION NOTE: *Various audience members will react to this play differently. Some will see it as a comedy, others as a drama, others as social commentary. The actors need to be ready for any reaction—some lines may prompt laughter for one performance but silence for another. Every actor must be certain to play the scene honestly, not attempting to mug or push any comic style.*

AT RISE: *Lights up to SAM and DON, crossing the stage, mid-conversation.*

SAM: I'm telling you, it's the truth—it doesn't matter.

DON: Come on. You don't believe that.

SAM: I absolutely believe that. You give me anything—anything!—as a starting point, and with enough spin, you've got it.

DON: All right, how about this box?

SAM: This one right here?

DON: Yeah, this very one.

SAM: If I had time enough...

DON: Hey, earlier you said you've got all the time in the world. That sounds like enough.

SAM: This box?

DON: This box.

SAM: Right here?

DON: Right here, right now, this box, anybody who comes by.

SAM: You know what? You're on. Ten bucks.

DON: An easy ten, nice. I'm going to watch you fall flat on your face.

SAM: You're going to watch me land right on my feet. Now, get away from here. Give me some room. You can't cramp my style.

DON: Oh, I won't come anywhere near your style. But I'll be watching.

SAM: Watching and witnessing greatness, my friend.

DON: Whatever you say. No tears when you fail, all right? I can't stand a mess like that.

SAM: Tears of triumph for me, tears of defeat for you. Now go hide. Go find a rock to crawl under; make yourself comfortable.

DON: (*Exiting.*) Right over here. Great view. Don't try to cheat!

BOX STEPS

SAM: Who do you think I am, you?

SAM looks at the box for a moment, sizing it up, then looks around before dropping to his knees, then prostrating himself as if worshiping the box. He mumbles as he “prays.” After a few seconds, three people—ETHAN, DANA and SAUNDRA—enter and watch him quizzically.

ETHAN: What is he doing?

DANA: Box worshiping. It's the latest thing.

ETHAN: Come on, really—what's this about?

DANA: How am I supposed to know?

SAUNDRA: Why don't you ask him?

ETHAN: Well, I don't want to.... Excuse me?

SAM keeps praying, mumbling a bit louder.

SAUNDRA: Hey, excuse us?

SAM perseveres, even louder.

DANA: You speakee de English? Hello?

SAM: Leave me, please.

DANA: You do speakee de English.

SAM: I speak English just fine, but I would thank you to leave me to my worship.

ETHAN: Your worship?

SAM: Yes.

ETHAN: What are you worshiping?

SAM: The Great Box. Now, if you please...

SAUNDRA: You worship a box?

SAM: Not just any box, heathens! I worship this Box, the Great Box, the One True Box!

DANA: Well, pardon us all to pieces. Come on, let's go.

ETHAN: Wait a second. (*To SAM.*) We're sorry to have disturbed your worship. Is there a time when we might be able to...

DANA: Ethan, for crying out loud.

ETHAN: It's interesting, okay? Go if you want to. I'll catch up with you. *(To SAM.)* Sir, I do not wish to disturb your worship any further, but I would like to talk to you about it at a more convenient...

SAM: If you wish to talk to me, you must wait until this worship session is over.

SAUNDRA: How about tomorrow, Ethan? I know you're curious, but...

ETHAN: I told you, you guys can go on ahead. I'm willing to wait.

DANA: What if his box worship lasts for three hours?

SAM: Now we may talk.

ETHAN: Wait, you mean you're done?

SAM: For now. What do you wish to know? I will answer your questions.

DANA: Oh, this should be good.

SAM: But this one *(Indicating DANA.)* must go.

DANA: Who, me?

SAM: You are not worthy to stand near the Box.

DANA: What do you mean, I'm not worthy? Who says?

SAM: No man says. The Box says. Your doubt and your negativity make you unworthy. Please leave.

DANA: Hey, you don't own the place. I can stand wherever I want.

SAM: I suppose you can. I suppose you are accustomed to spitting on other people's beliefs in the name of your freedom to do so.

DANA: I'm not spitting...

ETHAN: Dana.

DANA: What?

SAUNDRA: Why don't you back off a bit, okay? What difference does it make?

DANA: What difference? He's calling me unworthy to stand near his box. What's the deal with that?

SAM: This is not my box, heathen! This is The Great and Omniscient Box! This is the Box of all Boxes! Thou shalt have no other Boxes before It! Show some respect!

DANA: What? I'm not...

ETHAN takes DANA aside.

BOX STEPS

ETHAN: Dana, look, clearly the guy has a strong belief.

DANA: You think?

ETHAN: I respect that. I kind of...admire it, you know?

DANA: You admire a nut-case kneeling to a box?

ETHAN: I admire the strength of his conviction. I'd like to know more about it.

DANA: Fine. I'll stay here while you talk to the maniac.

ETHAN: Thanks. I hope you're far enough away.

DANA: Oh, well, let's hope so. Hey, word of advice: If he's offering Kool-Aid...

ETHAN: Yeah, yeah, got it.

SAUNDRA: This is a beautiful box.

SAM: Appearance means nothing. It is the great It Is.

SAUNDRA: Well, yes, but I just meant to say that, I mean...no disrespect intended.

SAM: None taken.

ETHAN: Hi. Um—my friend is just going to stand over there, if that's okay. So.

SAM: So.

ETHAN: I'm Ethan. And this is Sandra. And you are...

SAM: I am nothing more nor less than The Worshiper of the Great Box.

SAUNDRA: Kind of a long name.

ETHAN: The worshiper? Does that mean you're the only one?

SAM: Yes.

SAUNDRA: Wow. That must be kind of lonely, isn't it?

SAM: All I require for fulfillment is the presence of The Box.

ETHAN: Um—if you don't mind me asking, what...what does the Box...do for you?

SAM: Do for me? Do for me?

SAUNDRA: I think you asked the wrong question.

ETHAN: Well, that is, you mentioned fulfillment.

SAM: Yes.

ETHAN: What constitutes fulfillment when it comes to your...relationship with the Box?

SAM: Knowing that I have done and will do all that the Box requires, brings me fulfillment. Knowing that, when I die, I shall have a place at the right hand of the Box brings me fulfillment. Knowing that my trust lies in the One True Box and the One True Box alone—that brings me fulfillment. I need not ask for more.

SAUNDRA: How do you know you're, you know, doing everything the Box requires? When you pray to it, does it somehow give you a message back?

SAM: Of course.

ETHAN: Well, what form does that message take?

SAUNDRA: Ethan, you're getting pretty personal.

ETHAN: This fascinates me.

SAM: Pray with me.

SAUNDRA: What?

SAM: The affirmation you seek comes only through exercising faith in the One True Box.

SAUNDRA: I'm not seeking any...

ETHAN: I'm interested in faiths of all kinds.

SAM: You seek answers through your intellect, answers that can only be found through your heart. Pray with me.

DANA: Guys, can we get going or what? Come on.

SAM: Yes, perhaps you should go with your negative friend. None of you are worthy to be here.

DANA: Hey, Pal, how about I'll stop calling you a nut job if you stop with the worthy business, all right?

SAM: You fear it, don't you?

DANA: What are you talking about? I don't fear...

SAM: You sense my conviction. You admire it.

DANA: Admire? Oh, that's rich.

SAUNDRA: Hear him out.

SAM: And you fear that you have nothing to believe in. Nothing that will bring you comfort. You're afraid. Pray with me.

DANA: Pray to a box?

SAM: The One True Box.

ETHAN: We should do it.

SAUNDRA: Ethan...

ETHAN: What have we got to lose?

DANA: What have we got to lose? How about our sanity?

SAM: How about that sense of isolation you felt as your friends were talking with me?

DANA: I didn't feel isolated. I felt bored! I felt precious seconds of my life ticking away while my friends were wasting time with a box-worshipping lunatic!

SAM: Peace be with you. May you find worthiness, my frightened friend.

SAM kneels and begins to pray to the box again.

DANA: I am not...!

SAUNDRA: Come on. Ethan, come on.

DANA: "Frightened friend." Where does he get off...?

SAM: (*Pausing from praying, to ETHAN,*) Certain knowledge only comes through experience.

SAM goes back to his worship.

SAUNDRA: Ethan, we should go.

ETHAN: I'm going to try it.

DANA: Try what? What?

ETHAN: I'm going to pray with him.

DANA: Pray to a box?

ETHAN: (*Kneeling.*) He's right. I keep asking him questions about things that...go beyond words, right?

DANA: Don't get down on your knees like that, Ethan. Come on!

ETHAN: I think you are afraid, Dana.

DANA: Of what?

ETHAN: I don't know.

DANA: You think I'm afraid to kneel in front of a box? I'll kneel in front of a box.

ETHAN: And take it seriously?

DANA: I am worthy, I am unafraid, to kneel in front of a cardboard box.

SAM: The One True Box welcomes you, Dana, Ethan. It is glad you are not afraid. It hopes you will surrender fully to the experience.

DANA: Yeah, yeah.

SAM: It hopes you will dare to surrender fully to the experience.

ETHAN: Sandra?

SAUNDRA looks around, then gets to her knees.

SAUNDRA: Okay.

ETHAN: Uh, Sam?

SAM: Yes?

ETHAN: We, uh...thank-you for inviting us, but...

SAM: I will speak the words. Close your eyes. You need only dare to believe that the One True Box knows you and will care for you.

SAM leans forward and begins to mumble his "prayer." The others lean forward as well, copying SAM'S movements. After a few seconds, the box moves slightly. DANA looks up, startled. The box leans forward. DANA yells. Everyone stops praying.

DANA: Aah!

The box settles back down into its former position. We see Laura from the previous play sneak off, having come out from the box.

ETHAN: What?

DANA: Did you see it? It moved!

SAUNDRA: It did! Is there something in there?

SAM: It was a sign!

DANA: I thought it was going to fall on top of me. Somebody's in there! What kind of a hoax are you pulling here?

SAM: The One True Box gave us...

DANA jumps up from his knees and goes to the box.

ETHAN: Dana, don't!

DANA: One True Box my...

DANA knocks the box over, but it's empty.

SAM: You have defiled the Box!

ETHAN: I'm sorry! He was just...

SAUNDRA: I saw it move. I did!

DANA faints.

ETHAN: Holy crap. Dana! Dana, are you all right?

SAM: He has been struck down. Such is the penalty for unbelief.

SAUNDRA: Did he hit his head? I think he...

ETHAN: Dana?

DANA: *(Waking.)* I'm sorry. *(He gets to his knees and goes to SAM, groveling at his feet.)* Please forgive me.

SAM: You doubted the One True Box.

DANA: I did. But not anymore.

SAUNDRA: Dana, we should take you to the emergency room.

DANA: No, I need to stay here.

SAM: Go. Let the doctors attend to you.

DANA: I'm staying here!

ETHAN: I'm sure the box will be here when we get back. Won't it?

SAM: The will of the Great and True Box is not mine.

DANA: Don't make me leave. I felt something. Something true!

ETHAN: Just for a little while, Dana.

SAUNDRA: *(Taking out money.)* Here.

SAM: The One True Box has no need for your money.

SAUNDRA: Take it. *(She puts the money down beside the box.)* As a sign of our...commitment, okay, that we'll be back. I'll be back for the money. You can know that. We'll be back.

SAM: I will do my best.

ETHAN: Thank-you. Dana, come on. You took a bad fall.

DANA: Don't leave! Don't let the box leave!

SAM: I will do my best.

ETHAN, DANA and SAUNDRA exit. DON enters, clapping.

DON: Oh, bravo! I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it, my friend. You got me! Better yet, you got them. What did she give you? A hundred bucks?

SAM is focused on the box.

SAM: Perhaps it was meant to take this new position. I won't touch it.

DON: Hey, hey, Sammy, I'm a believer, okay? You don't need to keep going.

SAM: You are not a believer. The One True Box did move. I was a witness.

DON: Sam, come on. There was a girl, a little kid, she crawled out from under the box while you guys were...but you knew that already, didn't you? You knew it all along. You set me up.

SAM: Get away from me. Get away from here!

DON: What are you talking about?

SAM: You are not worthy to speak of or even be near the One True Box.

DON: Here's your ten bucks. You're taking this too far.

SAM: I don't want your money...infidel!

DON: What is your deal? (*SAM gets down on his knees and begins praying to the box again, mumbling as he has before.*) Sam, they're gone. You don't have to.... Sam! Knock it off! Come on! Sam? All right, I'm leaving. (*He puts the ten dollars down on top of the hundred SAUNDRA left.*) Here's your money. Use it to get yourself some therapy, huh? I'm leaving. I really am.

DON watches SAM for a few more seconds, then exits, shaking his head. SAM continues to pray for a few seconds, stops, looks over at the pile of money, prays a bit longer, then looks back at the money. Finally, he pockets the money, rises, and stands looking at the box for a long moment. He exits, opposite the side where DON went. The lights go down.

PLAY FOUR: THE DISAPPEARING LADY

PRODUCTION NOTE: *This play makes a seemingly quick transition from being a story about an aspiring magician to being a love scene. In order to justify this change, the romantic tension between the two characters must be apparent from the beginning.*

MARCUS: So, listen, thanks for agreeing to be my assistant.

SARAH: Your lovely assistant.

MARCUS: Right, of course.

SARAH: I've always liked that. "And now, with the help of my lovely assistant..." That's a standard magician line, right?

MARCUS: Absolutely.

SARAH: And every time I've heard it, I've thought, Hey, I would like to—someday, onstage—be a lovely assistant.

MARCUS: You never wanted to be the magician?

SARAH: No. No, come to think of it, that's pretty sexist on my part, isn't it? Is that terrible, that I would aspire to be a female stereotype like that?

MARCUS: Frankly, in this case, no—it's not terrible.

SARAH: Because it's helping you out.

MARCUS: Precisely.

SARAH: Okay, okay, so what are we doing here?

MARCUS: The Disappearing Lady.

SARAH: Aha! "And we say the magic words—sha-la-ma-zoo!—and my lovely assistant will disappear!"

MARCUS: Sha-la-ma-zoo?

SARAH: Hey, the magic words are not my territory, Bub.

MARCUS: Good thing.

SARAH: At least "sha-la-ma-zoo" is better than "abracadabra," right? Give me a little credit.

MARCUS: I grant you a little credit, my lovely assistant. Now, what you're going to do is get into this box.

SARAH: This box?

MARCUS: For practice. I'll get a better box for the real thing.

SARAH: Can the better box have, you know, a larger opening? I'm not exactly the incredible shrinking woman.

MARCUS: No problem. Here's some magic called a box cutter.

MARCUS cuts three edges of the side of the box so one whole side can swing open like a door.

SARAH: Ew, a man with a blade. So dangerous, so mysterious.

MARCUS: Yeah, let's hope not so klutzy. It's hard to do prestidigitation when you're missing digits.

SARAH: Presti-whata-huh?

MARCUS: Prestidigitation. Sleight of hand.

SARAH: Ooh, I like that. Presti, like presto, and digitation, moving fingers. Prestidigitation. Nice.

MARCUS: *(Finished altering the box.)* Yeah, it's a great word. There. All set now.

SARAH: All ready to prestidigitate the disappearing lady trick!

MARCUS: Well, prestidigitation refers more to card tricks, magic knots, juggling, that sort of thing.

SARAH: Do you do card tricks?

MARCUS: Absolutely.

SARAH: Do one. Do you have cards? Do one of those "pick a card" ones. I'm a sucker for those.

MARCUS: All right, but then we have to get to work.

SARAH: One card trick and then work, work, work.

The following dialogue can be altered slightly to accommodate the particular trick MARCUS is doing.

MARCUS: Okay, this is a regular deck of cards—will the lovely assistant confirm that fact?

SARAH: I'm your lovely victim right now.

MARCUS: Will my lovely victim please confirm that this is an unaltered, regular deck of normal playing cards, please?

SARAH: To the best of my knowledge, yes. I see nothing unusual about these cards.

MARCUS: Thank-you. Would you like to shuffle them?

SARAH: My shuffling generally involves dropping them all over the floor and then wondering why my deck only has 47 cards.

MARCUS: I'll do the honors, then.

He shuffles the deck adroitly.

SARAH: Yeah, see, that kind of shuffling I could probably do in my next life. Or the one after that. When I'm a much more coordinated person. That's some very nice shuffling.

MARCUS: All right. Will you pick a card, please?

SARAH: I pick—this one. Do you want to see it?

MARCUS: No, no! Don't show me.

SARAH: I know. Just kidding.

MARCUS: Memorize the card.

SARAH: Got it.

MARCUS: Now put it back into the deck.

SARAH: Putting it back...there!

MARCUS: Now, concentrate on your card. See it in your mind. Do you see it?

SARAH: I...forgot which one it was.

MARCUS: You didn't.

SARAH: You're right, I didn't.

MARCUS: I'm not sure I want such a smart aleck for a lovely assistant.

SARAH: As your lovely assistant, I promise to be a dumb aleck. A totally stupid aleck. Do you have my card?

MARCUS: Is it...this one?

SARAH: No.

MARCUS: No? Are you sure you're concentrating?

SARAH: I'm completely sure. I see it clear as day, in my brain.

MARCUS: Clear as day, in your brain, you see...the ace of clubs?

SARAH: Yes! How did you do that?

MARCUS: Magic.

SARAH: No, prestidigitation. Tell me how you did it.

MARCUS: Simplest trick in the book—when you returned the card, I put the deck behind my back, flipped your card over so that when I showed you the deck, I was looking right at it.

SARAH: I never even noticed you put it behind your back!

MARCUS: That's the idea of sleight of hand—distraction. Now...work.

SARAH: One card trick and work, work, work. That was my promise.

MARCUS: All right, so...the disappearing woman. I'll say all kinds of impressive stuff about how difficult this trick is; I'll call someone up from the audience to look the box over; and then you'll get in.

SARAH: I get in the box.

MARCUS: Right.

SARAH: Right now?

MARCUS: Right.

She gets in.

SARAH: Here I am, one lovely assistant in one practice cardboard box.

MARCUS: And then, I close the door.

SARAH: Before you do, am I going to have to do some sort of contortionist thing in here? Because if you need me to be really flexible as your lovely assistant, I'm going to need a few weeks to practice. Splits and all that.

MARCUS: No contortions required.

SARAH: Oh, good. So, after you close the door, then what do I do?

MARCUS: You disappear.

SARAH: Yeah, but...

MARCUS: Door closing! And then I turn to the audience and say some more impressive words about how difficult this trick is, and I spin the box around a couple times...

He spins the box.

SARAH: *(Inside the box.)* Whoa! Warn me before you do that!

MARCUS: No noise from in there!

SARAH: Okay, okay, as long as I know what's coming.

MARCUS: Then I say a thing or two more to get the crowd's expectations up and then...I open the door! And you're gone!

He opens the door. SARAH is standing there.

SARAH: Hi.

MARCUS: You're still there.

SARAH: Yeah.

MARCUS: You were supposed to disappear.

SARAH: Well...but you didn't tell me how.

MARCUS: It's supposed to be magic.

SARAH: But you're the magician. You're supposed to tell me how to disappear.

MARCUS: Sarah, when I put you in the box, you will be there.

SARAH: Okay.

MARCUS: And then, when I open the door, you will not be there.

SARAH: Is that your idea of telling me how to do this?

MARCUS: Yes. Be there, then don't be there. And then be there again later, of course. Nobody wants a disappearing lady who stays disappeared.

SARAH: You're...okay, I get it. It's a joke. You're being funny. Cute, it was cute.

MARCUS: Are you ready?

SARAH: For what?

MARCUS: To do it. To disappear when I close this door.

SARAH: Marcus, enough already!

MARCUS: What?

SARAH: Enough with the joke.

MARCUS: I'm not joking.

SARAH: You have to be! I can't...how am I supposed to...where's the, like, hidden compartment or the false wall or fake bottom or...? I don't know how to work this trick! That's your job.

MARCUS: I don't want this to be a trick.

SARAH: Like with the cards, how you put them behind your back and I didn't even notice...the distraction thing. What do you mean, you don't want it to be a trick?

MARCUS: I said I wanted to do The Disappearing Lady. I didn't say anything about a trick.

SARAH: What are you talking about?

MARCUS: Magic! I'm talking about magic!

SARAH: All right, you're scaring me a little. I agreed to do this. I thought it was a cool hobby. I really did like the idea of the lovely assistant thing, but I don't get what you're doing right now.

MARCUS: Can you try it again, please?

SARAH: Marc...

MARCUS: Please.

SARAH: Try what again? Getting in the box, having you shut the door, standing in the dark, having no idea what you want me to do?

MARCUS: I just want you...

SARAH: Nobody can disappear without it being a trick, Marcus! I'm not going to try it again! Stop it.

MARCUS: I'm sorry. I guess...I thought you might be the one.

SARAH: The one? Look, I liked your card trick. It was nice. You fooled me, but...

MARCUS: Ever since I could remember, I've wanted to do magic.

SARAH: That's good.

MARCUS: Real magic.

SARAH: What do you mean?

MARCUS: I mean, no tricks. No illusions. No hands behind the back, no distractions. I mean, yes, I've learned the sleight of hand stuff, the tricks, but I've always wanted to...I always thought those were just skills that would take me to a place where....where...

SARAH: You could actually stick a person in a box and have her disappear? Really, actually disappear?

MARCUS: I tried it myself. With a mirror. I kept getting into the box, but then, when I would push open the box, I realized that I was still there to be pushing it open, so I knew I hadn't disappeared. So I rigged up this automatic door closer and opener. I used a motor and string—anyway, I still couldn't get it to work. I mean, not only did I never disappear, but I realized that I could never see myself disappeared, right? If the door opened and I wasn't there, then I wouldn't have the eyes to see myself not be there.

SARAH: Kind of like the tree falling in the woods problem, right?

MARCUS: Yeah.

SARAH: You do know that nobody—David Copperfield, Chris Angel, all those guys—nobody really does the kind of magic you're talking about, right?

MARCUS: I guess not.

SARAH: Because you're wanting to, like, defy the laws of science. That's...that's God stuff, you know?

MARCUS: Remember Mrs. Snow, junior English?

SARAH: Mrs. Yackety-yack? Holy crap, that woman could talk! Unbelievable!

MARCUS: After the first week, I never heard a thing she said. She was like white noise.

SARAH: There's your magic—the disappearing voice. There but not there.

MARCUS: Except one day—one day! I'll never forget this. May 11th, six years ago.

SARAH: Wow.

MARCUS: Seriously, I remember it to the day. Hamlet—she was going on and on about the genius of Hamlet—droning and droning and droning. But these words, these words from the play, they just...Sarah, it was like they exploded out of the air and lit fire in my brain.

SARAH: What? What words?

MARCUS: They're not going to mean much to you, I guarantee, but they meant everything to me, and they still do. Hamlet says, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

SARAH: You're right. They don't mean much to me.

MARCUS: It's about magic! Magic, the real magic, is when you can do something that goes beyond anyone's understanding! And when Hamlet said that, when Shakespeare had Hamlet say that, I just thought, "Yeah! Yeah, that's true!" That has to be true.

SARAH: You want it to be true.

MARCUS: It has to be. Has to be. Just once.

SARAH: I don't think I can help you.

MARCUS: I guess not.

SARAH starts to leave.

SARAH: Have you asked...I mean, has anyone else been better at...?

MARCUS: You're the only one I asked, Sarah.

SARAH: Why?

MARCUS: Because...

SARAH: Why me, Marcus?

MARCUS: Because I fell in love with you and I don't know how that happened and you should go.

SARAH: Marcus, you know I'm...

MARCUS: I know. I'm sorry I told you. Nothing can come of it. It's just the way it is, one of those things. It's not an issue. I'm not going to let it become an issue. I don't want to get in your way. I'm not trying to...(SARAH crosses over to the box and gets in it.)
What are you doing?

SARAH: We should try this again.

MARCUS: Sarah, you don't need to...

SARAH: But go through your whole spiel. Say the words, all of them.

MARCUS: I don't have them worked out.

SARAH: Then work them out.

MARCUS: Ladies and gentlemen...gentlemen and ladies.... (To SARAH.) I need to sit down with pen and pa...

SARAH: Use the Shakespeare line. Go on.

MARCUS: To quote the great bard, ladies and gentlemen, "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy!" And today, my assistant and I...

SARAH: Lovely, lovely!

MARCUS: You like that?

SARAH: No! I'm your love...

MARCUS: Oh, yes! And today, my lovely assistant and I are going to demonstrate one of those very things that you have never dreamt possible! This is no trick. This box has no false bottoms, no false tops, no false anything!

SARAH: Top, bottom, side, side, side—nothing but a box!

MARCUS: How, then, will we be performing The Amazing, Lovely, Disappearing Sarah today? Through true magic! When I close this box, when I count to five, my lovely, lovely, gorgeous, captivating...

SARAH: Oh, you're making me blush.

MARCUS: ...assistant will...

SARAH: But I like to blush.

MARCUS: ...gorgeous, captivating, lovely, beautiful, shining, inspiring, laughing assistant will—simply, truly and without trickery—disappear. How were those words?

SARAH: Those were nice.

MARCUS: And now, I will shut the door and count to five. One, two, three, four, five! And now I will open the door and...

SARAH is standing there.

SARAH: Give me ten more.

MARCUS: And now I will shut the door again and in ten seconds, the mysterious and heart-breakingly wonderful Sarah will disappear! By magic!

He shuts the door.

MARCUS: Ten, nine, eight, seven, six...

SARAH: Slower!

MARCUS: ...five, four, three, two...one.

He opens the door. SARAH steps out and gives him a long kiss.

SARAH: It worked.

MARCUS: Well, something did.

SARAH: Congratulations.

MARCUS: Uh...

SARAH: The Sarah that went in that box disappeared.

MARCUS: And you are...?

SARAH: An entirely different person. Abracadabra, shalamazoo.

MARCUS: Wow. You look remarkably like someone I used to know, a lovely assistant I had.

SARAH: She's gone. Sorry. Disappeared.

MARCUS: Oh.

SARAH: But if the position's open, I'd like to apply.

MARCUS: You're hired.

SARAH: What's the pay?

MARCUS: Nothing.

SARAH: Do I get to hang out with someone who thinks I'm beautiful and who believes that there is such a thing as real magic?

MARCUS: Yes, you do.

SARAH: I'll take it. When do I start?

MARCUS: As close to now as possible.

SARAH: Perfect.

MARCUS: One question.

SARAH: Shoot.

MARCUS: Do you have any idea what happened to my old assistant?

SARAH: Do you want her back?

MARCUS: Well...

SARAH: Because she was pretty stupid.

MARCUS: How so?

SARAH: She didn't even know her own heart.

MARCUS: Oh. One of those.

SARAH: Good thing she disappeared.

MARCUS: Definitely.

They kiss. The lights go down.

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PLAY FIVE: OWNED

AT RISE: *MARY enters and proceeds to cut the flap off the box. Having removed it, she takes out a marker and begins to write on the flap. PHIL enters.*

PHIL: What...what you have done? How dare you?

MARY: What's the matter?

PHIL: Why did you do that? (*Snatching the flap.*) Give me that!

MARY: Wait a minute. I was using...

PHIL: You had no right!

MARY: I, well, I wrote on it. I started to...

PHIL: Why did you do that? (*Reading what she's written.*) "Mart."
What is that?

MARY: Look, I needed a sign. I'm working with some kids over at the...

PHIL: Oh, oh, you needed a sign.

MARY: Yes, we're setting up a display at the community fair.

PHIL: You needed a sign.

MARY: I didn't think it would bother....

PHIL: You needed a sign.

MARY: Why do you keep repeating...

PHIL: And so, what does that mean? You needed a sign. You had a need. So that means, because you need something, that automatically gives you permission to steal...

MARY: Now, wait a minute.

PHIL: To take a quick rummage around, to see what you think will fulfill your need, and then, with no regard for considerations of personal property, you just vandalize and steal...

MARY: Now, come on!

PHIL: Vandalize, defile, destroy and steal to fulfill your need.

MARY: You've got to be joking.

PHIL: Oh, oh, we don't know one another. You must not realize that when I am speaking like this, when my face is set like this, I am definitely not joking.

MARY: Is there something I'm not seeing here? This is a box. An empty cardboard box.

PHIL: I admire your skills of perception. Amazingly acute.

MARY: You know, I don't appreciate your sarcasm.

PHIL: You don't appreciate my sarcasm.

MARY: No.

PHIL: You find it—what? Disrespectful? Rude?

MARY: Exactly. Like you said, I don't know you...

PHIL: Just curious. What do you find more disrespectful, more rude, more intrusive, more criminal, even...

MARY: I know where you're going...

PHIL: Among perfect strangers, what's more criminal—a few words with a particular tone or out-and-out theft of that perfect stranger's property?

MARY: So this is your box.

PHIL: So astute.

MARY: I'm sorry, but I don't see your name on it.

PHIL: My God, have we suddenly devolved into third-graders? My name on it? Is this your property? Are you standing on your property right now?

MARY: No. This is an alleyway. As far as I know, it's not anybody's...

PHIL: As far as you know.

MARY: An alleyway does not belong...

PHIL: As far as you know.

MARY: The repeating thing again.

PHIL: And just how far do you know, pray tell? Do you happen to be an expert in property law?

MARY: You know what? Forget it. If this is your alleyway...

PHIL: It is.

MARY: Congratulations on your ownership of a gorgeous alley. My apologies for trespassing, and I certainly hope you enjoy your box that was in your alleyway. Forgive me. I was just trying to set a thing up with these kids.

PHIL: With kids? Well, why didn't you say so?

MARY: I did, earlier.

PHIL: Because if you're setting something up for children, why, then, you have every right in the world to steal things. "Mart." What are you selling at this "mart" of yours, may I ask?

MARY: I wasn't done. "Mart" was part of a word.

PHIL: You're not selling the children, I hope. Child-mart. That's very illegal.

MARY: Funny. I'll go find a sign somewhere else. Thanks so much for your help and gener-

PHIL: Oh, now, where are you going?

MARY: I'm getting out of your alley, sir. Getting off your property.

PHIL: What about my box?

MARY: What about it?

PHIL: You work with children. Is this the example you set for them—when you do damage to people or their property, you simply walk away?

MARY: Damage?

PHIL: Yes, damage. The box is not in the same state it was when you found it.

MARY: What, do you want me to pay you for the flap I ripped off your box? It's a piece of cardboard. It's not worth anything.

PHIL: Now you're assigning worth to my property? My, you claim expertise in all kinds of areas, don't you?

MARY: Fine. What do you want? A buck? Here you go. Now get out of my way.

PHIL: A dollar. Let me ask you something.

MARY: I'm busy.

PHIL: No, no, no, stay for a moment. Kids have an incredible knack for amusing themselves; they'll be fine.

MARY: I said...

PHIL: It's the least you can do, to hear me out for just a minute. After all, you did come traipsing on my property without permission. You did rip a piece of my personal possession, also without permission.

MARY: Fine. A minute.

PHIL: Thank-you. Now, you say my box is worthless, yes?

MARY: Yes.

PHIL: Let's imagine that a burglar breaks into a home.

MARY: I didn't break in.

PHIL: Not you. This is a hypothetical criminal, not an actual one. Let's say this burglar breaks into a home, and in the course of burgling, rifles through a desk and finds a rolled-up piece of paper, which he deems worthless and thus tears to pieces. Are you following me?

MARY: It's not hard.

PHIL: And let's just say that that particular piece of rolled-up paper turned out to be, I don't know, an original Picasso sketch. Now, if you were a judge in this case, would you hold the burglar accountable for his estimation of the paper's worth, or would you hold him accountable for the worth as assessed by, say, an art dealer?

MARY: That's a ridiculous comparison.

PHIL: Is it? Do you know anything about this cardboard box?

MARY: No.

PHIL: Do you know anything about me?

MARY: No.

PHIL: Is it inconceivable, then, that this box, and the flap you ripped off of it, could somehow be of much higher value than you grant them?

MARY: I doubt it.

PHIL: Well, your doubt is not really the issue, is it? The issue is that you have no authority to assign wealth to something that is not your own.

MARY: You're right. Point made, point taken. I apologize for taking the flap off your box and for writing on it.

PHIL: I accept your apology.

MARY: Excellent.

PHIL: Now, about restitution. I don't want your dollar.

MARY: Take your hand off my arm.

PHIL: Your dollar will not suffice as restitution.

MARY: I said, take your hand...

PHIL: My hand is removed. For now.

MARY: You'd better take the buck, because that's all you're getting from me.

PHIL: Is it?

MARY: Guaranteed.

PHIL: I think you owe me more. I think that appropriate restitution might come in forms other than monetary.

MARY: You don't want to keep going in this direction.

PHIL: I think, if you were to, for instance, get in that box of mine you defiled, and I were to join you...

MARY: You might want to know...

PHIL: Away from the prying eyes of spectators...

BOX STEPS

MARY: The whole thing I was going to write on that sign.

PHIL: Who knows? The transaction might even be enjoyable.

PHIL reaches to touch MARY'S hair. She sharply slaps his hand away.

PHIL: Oh, spirited! This could be more fun than...

MARY: Do not try to touch me again. Do not keep backing me up.

PHIL: You have a debt to pay. Get in the box and pay it.

MARY: I'm leaving. And I'm taking this sign.

PHIL: Really?

MARY: Really, pervert. Stand aside.

PHIL: And if I refuse?

MARY: Then you're going to find out exactly what is going to be on the rest of this sign.

PHIL: I think you want me to know. Are you flirting with me?

MARY: Let's be 100% clear. I have warned you not to touch me. I have asked you to get out of my way. If you make another physical advance and do not let me go, you will regret it.

PHIL: Is that right?

MARY: It is.

PHIL: I'll take my chances. Get in the box.

PHIL reaches for MARY. She quickly grabs his arm and twists his hand into a very painful position. PHIL screams and goes down on his knees, powerless. MARY still holds the sign. She puts it in front of PHIL'S face.

MARY: What does this say? Read it!

PHIL: Mart! Mart!

MARY: No, it does not. It is the first four letters of a longer word. Pay attention. Are you paying attention?

PHIL: Yes. Let me go!

MARY: The rest of the letters are i-a-l. Are you getting that?

PHIL: I-a-l! Okay!

MARY: So what does the word spell? What?

PHIL: Martial! It spells martial! You're killing me!

MARY: No, I'm hurting you. Killing you would be painless but a lot more permanent. Pay attention now, scumbag, because I'm going to tell you the rest of the letters that are going to be on this sign that you are so generously going to let me have. Aren't you?

PHIL: Yes! Just let go of my...

MARY: A-r-t-s spells what?

PHIL: Arts. Arts. Martial arts.

MARY: Oh, very good. Now, this last word is going to be long, so focus that perverted little brain of yours. D-e-m-o-n-s-t-r-a-t-i-o-n. What's that spell? What does it spell!?

PHIL: D-e-m...demonstration! Demonstration! I got it!

MARY lets PHIL go. He falls to the ground, clutching his arm.

MARY: Yes, you did get it. And if you'd like to get it even more, why don't you come on over and see my students at work? They'll be there all afternoon, showing the moves I taught them.

PHIL: Look, I didn't...

MARY: What? Didn't know that you were dealing with someone who could take care of herself? Guess you might have been the one underestimating things a bit, huh? Thanks for the sign.

She walks off. PHIL gets to his feet, still cradling his arm and hand. He starts to walk away. MARY re-enters.

MARY: Hey!

PHIL yells and cowers away from her, tripping over the box and falling.

MARY: Enjoy your box.

She exits. The lights go down.

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