

306 Hollywood

[Start of recorded material 00:00:00]

Elan: [00:01:10] This is the house at 306 Hollywood Avenue. It's a lot like other people's houses, maybe like yours.

Jonathan: Our grandma bought the house in 1944. She lived her for 67 years and then she died.

[00:01:40] Our story begins a few years before we were born. In 1970, our mother, Marilyn, moved from the house in New Jersey to New York. Here she is, driving back to visit grandma.

Elan: This is our grandma, Annette Ontell.

[00:02:12] And that's our mom. Here she is as a kid.

Jonathan: That's our Uncle David. And there's Grandpa Herman. As kids, our mom would bring us with her to Jersey.

Elan: That's me, Elan.

Jonathan: [00:02:32] That's me, Jonathan. Some people go to church every Sunday. We went to grandma's house every Sunday for 30 years.

Annette: Wait, let me get my glasses off. My God, I'm so surprised. Oh, my goodness.

[00:03:02] I got a bouquet. Well, they are. They're exquisite American Beauty red roses.

Marilyn: I know but...

Annette: I love them.

Marilyn: What's the first thing...?

Annette: But they don't last long.

Marilyn: I know.

Annette: How much do they cost? It's a killer.

Marilyn: Ma, let me tell you how much it cost.

Elan: Grandma was like a second mother to us, but we really only saw her here. As far as we knew, the house was her world.

Jonathan: [00:03:50] We kind of knew it was nothing special but for two city kids it felt like a universe.

Elan: In the afternoon, I'd wait for the train to come. At night, I'd dream it was passing through the house.

Jonathan: [00:04:33] I remember the sound of Grandpa Herman's typewriter. He would spend hours writing strongly worded letters. Sometimes our Uncle David would come by to watch planes, the ones he was too scared to ride in.

Elan: [00:05:07] On sunny days, Grandma would do the laundry and transform into a silhouette. I remember when she bought us a dinosaur puzzle. Each time we put it together, I imagined the room became a forest.

[00:05:50] Over the years, the house got quieter. First, Uncle David died, then Grandpa Herman. Grandma was now alone in the house.

Annette: Oh, my God, I'm just taking a look at your socks, poor kids. You've cleaned up my floor with your socks and now you're going home with dirty socks.

[00:06:21] Well, you'll put them in the washing machine. So that's a story.

Jonathan: In 2001, we started to film her. We interviewed her every year for the next ten years.

Annette: I used to love to eat big chunks of butter which is vitamin A. They never had shoes in Russia. I says *dosh ish my nomen. My nomen is Anchikal.* [Speaking in Yiddish.]

[00:06:51] We'd ask for five cents worth of ice, ten cents worth of ice, fifteen cents. They'd go to the bathroom outside and the pig would come along and lick their behinds. That's what she told me.

Elan: You ever wish you were young?

Annette: No.

Elan: Grandma, are you vain?

Annette: Oh, yes, I am.

Elan: Do you miss sex?

Annette: Oh, no, not at my age.

Jonathan: [00:07:22] During one interview, she showed us six cameras she had in the house. We filmed her with the seventh.

Elan: In terms of the people that you spent most of your life with.

Annette: They're all gone.

Elan: Who's all gone?

Annette: I think of Gertrude Eidelman. I think of Frances Friedman, Morris Lethowitz, Maurice Titlebaum, Bertha Drapekin, Mrs. Necelski, Dr. Polevski, Rosie Gordenski, Eddie Moss, and then of course, my uncle, Gus Schlusser, they're all gone. We had a club of 13 girls, Jewish girls, down at the Y.

[00:08:04] They're all gone. There's no one left, no one, but myself. So I don't whether it's called being fortunate but I'm a survivor.

Elan: How do you feel about not have them around?

Annette: Well, somebody has to be the last one on the totem pole and, apparently, I am. Of course, I feel bad about it but just keep going.

[00:08:38] I'm not living in Never Never Land. I'm living in this land, this lifetime.

Elan: After 16 years alone, Grandma became sick with pneumonia. For six months, she lived in the hospital. We all visited every day.

Marilyn: Lonnie [Elan] and I were there.

[00:09:11] And I said to my mother, Ma, I'll be back tomorrow. We'll all be back tomorrow. And she was intensive care. She said what time will you be here tomorrow? I said by 1:30 in the afternoon we will be here. So I went and I immediately got home and I got a phone call and it was the nurse in the intensive care saying that my mother was really sick. And I called you and Jonathan on my cell phone. I said get in the car. I'm coming; I'm in a cab. We have to go. Grandma is dying.

[00:09:41] Grandma is dying. I was – I was ready to kill myself because I wasn't there for her when she died. That was terrible. I wasn't there for her and I wanted to rip myself apart.

[00:10:19] I wanted to kill myself. When we got there, she was dead but they let her stay there and we were all with her and I kissed her and I said, "Ma,

please forgive me. Please forgive me. I love you. Please forgive me.” But she died. She died and I wasn't there.

Marilyn: [00:11:41] Oh, look at. Mary Malera died. Look what she had. Mother carried these.

Jonathan: It's one week after the funeral. Our mom wants to get rid of everything as quickly as possible. I think it's her way of dealing with things.

Marilyn: [00:12:11] Look at this. Comparables. My mother's house is worth nothing. I can't believe it. Let me put this in here. Paul Levy, Paul Levy. See here's one she didn't send. 'As I am now 70 years of age I feel grateful.' That's enough, Jonathan.

Elan: [00:13:03] Mommy asked me to shred decades' worth of paper. She can't bear to do it herself. Herman was an accountant. He never threw anything away. There go 1987's taxes.

[00:13:33] There go the Medicare benefits. Grandma was a fashion designer. She collected fashion magazines her whole life. There go the styles of 1984. She kept all of her canceled checks. There go her phone calls, her medication, the electricity.

[00:14:14] She used the same phone book her whole life. As people died she would cross them out.

Jonathan: [00:14:42] Our mother finds a buyer. In one week they sign the contract, but strange things have begun to happen.

Elan: [00:15:19] Next to Grandma's bed, a woman appears.

Sherry Anthony: [00:15:28] One moment they're there and they're tangible and then the next moment they've passed. And then you have to see them buried or cremated. That's incredibly painful. When a loved one passes away, it's believed that the soul's realizing what's happening. First it hovers near its body. It was with those arms that it held onto its children.

[00:15:58] It was with those eyes that it saw the beauty of the world and they're in turmoil. After the loved one is buried their soul continues to the place on earth that was most familiar and comforting and that's its home. We believe that the soul remains near the home for a period of eleven months. Right now you have those eleven months to make your grandmother tangible again because your grandmother is still here.

Elan: [00:16:38] Seriously, eleven months? Look, I don't believe in spirits but somehow what she says makes sense.

Jonathan: One day before we sign the contract the next strange thing happens.

[00:17:08] A portal appears in the kitchen. Through the portal the house looks the same only everything's upside down.

Annette: I have these very small pieces. Even the cream cheese on a bagel gives me severe heartburn.

Jonathan: [00:17:48] It feels like she's calling me.

Annette: Remember, remember. Try to go back. All right, kiddo, let's go.

Jonathan: [00:18:37] I find myself in the past. It's 1998 and I'm 20 years old living in Rome. This is the classroom where I study art history. This is the view out the window and these are the starlings that fill the night sky. I can't hear grandma but I hear my professor.

Ezio
Genovesi: [00:19:08] Go out. See Rome, anything, because whichever area you walk you are going to meet something which is old, something which is contemporary, something which is different time periods.

Jonathan: I used to ride these trains past modern buildings, ancient ruins, and Mr. [Stella] watching the world go by.

Ezio
Genovesi: [00:19:46] It's a multi-layer story of humankind in this very place.

Jonathan: When I'm in Rome the past feels alive. Maybe that's why grandma brought me back.

Jonathan: [00:21:03] Grandma's house is transformed. Her bedroom isn't for sleeping. Her kitchen isn't for eating and her objects are no longer for use. They're for telling stories.

[00:21:38] Grandma's house isn't a home anymore. It's a ruin.

Jan Gadeyne: [00:21:55] You know, when you're on an archeological dig and you find all this evidence of the presence of man you start to imagine how these people would have lived and you do that on the base of what you find and that can be the remains of their houses, the walls that you find, the thatched roofs of their huts or the remains of their pottery whether it is fancy or less fancy.

[00:22:42] You even start thinking about where they got their stuff from, how did it get here, what was the trade route? These are the things that I think, you

know, they kind of stimulate...they tickle almost your imagination. Obviously, one should not let one's self be carried away by too much because in your reconstruction, after all you have to base it upon firm scholarly scientific grounds.

Elan: [00:23:25] We talk it over and decide there's only one thing for us to do.

Jonathan: We're turning grandma's house into an archaeological dig.

Marilyn: That's ridiculous. It's fucking ridiculous. Who the fuck is going to have an archeological dig at 306 Hollywood Avenue? Who in their right mind? You're both fucking crazy and really fucking lunatics. You're so ridiculous. An archeological dig!

Elan: [00:24:00] She's right, of course. But when we ask her for time to excavate, she agrees. She wants to know what's left of grandma too. We're keeping the house.

Jonathan: But we only have eleven months.

Elan: There's so much shit in this house.

Jonathan: Well, we still have the...in our first excavation we find a photo of our Uncle David.

Elan: [00:24:32] With his wife, Elaine.

Jonathan: A tableau of carefully arranged objects. What is that?

Elan: The summer light in the backyard. Notes grandma wrote to everyone. Four clothespins that look like fallen over dolls.

Jonathan: [00:25:05] Three vacuum cleaners, two more than needed. One filing cabinet full of dead people's taxes.

Elan: The creases from grandma's perfect folds.

Jonathan: Two more vacuums. Lots and lots of books, some with out of date titles.

Elan: Seven band-aid boxes.

[00:25:42] But of course, only one with band-aids. Ten years worth of interviews with our grandmother.

Jonathan: We bring the tapes back with us to New York and we turn her on.

Elan: Can you count to ten for me one more time?

Annette: [00:26:22] One, two, three, four, five...

Marilyn: Give me that. I'll take that from you.

Annette: Six, seven, eight, nine, ten.

Elan: She looks so lost but here she is on hours and hours of tape.

Annette: How many days will you have to go through all this?

Elan: [00:26:54] It's going to take a while. You've got a lot to say.

Annette: Personal hygiene is what we call it today. You have to keep your bodily orifices clean - your mouth, your teeth, your vaginal area, your rectal area. You've got to be clean.

Elan: I got the idea to interview her when I got my first camera in film school.

[00:27:24] It was a way to ask her questions I wouldn't normally ask. They started when she was 83 and ended when she was 93. I counted. We asked her total of 87 questions. For our next excavation we make an archive of grandma as video. She lived a grand and simple life.

Jonathan: [00:27:55] Grandma, where did you grow up?

Annette: Newark in a ghetto with all the bakeries and pushcarts and dry goods stores, kosher butchers with dead chickens lying in the window.

Elan: I love that she was a fashion designer. I used to dress up in her clothes.

Jonathan: In one sentence could you tell Lonnie what you did for your career?

Annette: [00:28:26] Well, in the first place I mastered pattern making.

Jonathan: One sentence to sum it all up. What was it that you did as your professional work?

Annette: I wanted to make girls feel...

Elan: But, grandma...we talk over each other sometimes, probably got that from mother. She and grandma were inseparable.

Marilyn: Did you see this? Look at this, Lonnie.

Annette: It's wore out. It's a breast.

Marilyn: Wear out everything in her tits.

Annette: [00:28:56] She's my joy. She keeps me living. Marilyn, you treat me like a goddess. Thank you. Okay, darling.

Elan: My mom married our father who's Venezuelan. They got divorced. Do you wish mommy had married a Jewish man?

Annette: No, I don't care. At times I did.

Elan: Everything was about being Jewish.

Jonathan: [00:29:27] Grandma, what was that you were reading before? You were reading about someone who was just Jewish? Who was it? Elvis?

Annette: Here. Read this. Elvis who was born of a Jewish mother was in fact Jewish. Boy, am I chauvinistic.

Elan: Grandma met Herman when they were fifteen. She took care of the house. He took care of the finances.

Marilyn: My mother used to say we are an iron and steal business.

Annette: [00:29:58] I would iron and he would steal.

Elan: They fought all the time but they stayed together forever.

Annette: If you love a guy, if a guy is good to you and if he's smart and he's decent and he's got good values and he's sincere and he's not a womanizer, you got it made. And where was Herman going to womanize the way he was?

[00:30:30] You know, sick guy. Sexually he was fine if he was under control, everything, he was fine but the blindness.

Elan: Finally there was their son, David. He had a schizophrenic episode when he was sixteen and all he ever wanted was a normal life. He died at 48. Does it seem strange to have already gone so long with him having passed away.

Annette: [00:31:02] All the time. Of course, it's very strange. Fourteen years have passed by already and it seems like yesterday. But you never forget. Sometimes I think he's still around. I still hear his footsteps coming to check how I was and of course, the memory never lessens. I'm always thinking that here he's coming. You don't lose...

Elan: [00:31:46] Hearing her speak again feels surreal. I almost forget she's just data on a tape. And just like that, the tape breaks.

[00:32:24] Finding the tapes was like finding more time with her. They're everything she'll ever say. Now an hour of that time is gone.

Jan Gadeyne: I think that the physical evidence also helps to preserve the memory of the past, whether it is of an event, whether it is of a person.

[00:33:01] If it is not there it's harder, harder to feel that event, harder to feel that person. It's a bit of a substitute. It's a bit of a surrogate, of course, but it definitely helps.

Elan: So what else is left?

Annette: [00:33:35] How can you take all this garbage, that'll take all this garbage here on this counter? This'll be a shanda to show all this garbage, that I have clutter, clutter. That's one thing I've never gotten rid of clutter. I'm a...what they call it? A rat trap or trap? What do they call that type of a person that has a ton of crap? Trap?

Elan: [00:34:14] Packrat.

Annette: Packrat! I'm a packrat!

Jonathan: For our next excavation we set off with a simple goal - bring some order to the chaos. Archaeologists have a name for this. They call them catalogues. The idea is that the groupings, the patterns reveal some underlying connection, some underlying order.

[00:34:46] So we make our own catalogues. We start with a specific kind and we call them portraits. Here's one grandma. A portrait made of stockings. This one's of Grandpa Herman made of hats, shoes, and ties. Then we make a portrait of Uncle David and we just use everything left of him that we can find.

[00:35:21] Some catalogues come easy but others, I'm not really sure what they say. Like this. Why did she keep so many toothbrushes? I don't know. Anyway, her rainbow gives us some idea. We begin to catalogue by color. Pink evokes mid-century domesticity. Beige is sort of plastic and basic utility. All of these objects are recording thousands of decisions. Like this.

[00:35:53] Our mother bought that painting and this is grandma's dress form she used to make clothes. Each thing, no matter how small, is a trace of a person from the past and all we have are traces. We are time travelers and we

find imprints of time pressed into everything we find. Before we know it we find a hundred years, a hundred years spanning 20th century typography.

[00:36:27] 2007 - grandma's appointment book telling us what she thought on November 16th. Frightening. 1940 - the state of the world in postage stamps. When the stamp was printed, Hitler was in power. 1944 - and while the world was at war. Deed - our grandparents bought their house at 306 Hollywood. 1994 - Grandpa Herman died.

[00:36:58] And in 1995 grandma finished paying off his tombstone - balance on Herman B. Ontell. That's an odd way to phrase it. Radios, so many radios. Grandpa would buy a new one every year, wanted to be a musician. He was a poor kid and music didn't pay. So he became an accountant.

[00:37:29] His job was torture. He hated it. So he always looked for something else to do. He played instruments. He bought gadgets. And he wrote letters seeking justice in the world, doing what he could in his own unique way.

[00:38:00] This last letter was written in 1963. That same year JFK was assassinated and his story came to an end as all stories do.

Jonathan: We never really actually...if you look through the drawers, grandma kept the things that made her most happy and most angry.

Elan: What do you mean, most angry?

Jonathan: There's like all these things about Elaine and Irene, David's wives.

Elan: [00:38:31] I know. I always forget that David had married twice.

Jonathan: But it's kind of like nasty letters were there along with things like from us and from mommy and from their friends.

Elan: But come one, isn't that what everyone keeps?

Jonathan: I don't know. Does everyone keep the nasty stuff?

Elan: I don't know. I guess if it's really nasty.

Elan: [00:39:06] Grandma was never on the cover of Life magazine like JFK and her life with Herman wasn't exactly Camelot. She doesn't have a presidential library or a team of archivists. She just has us.

Jonathan: Let's get real. We don't really know what we're doing.

Elan: Of course we don't. It's completely overwhelming.

Jonathan: So much stuff.

Elan: This house has so much stuff.

Jonathan: I feel sometimes like every single object has some sort of meaning.

Elan: Yeah, but it might all just be junk.

Jonathan: [00:39:36] But if we throw it out, that's it. It's gone forever.

Elan: But how do we know what we should keep or what we should throw away?

Jonathan: I don't know.

Elan: So we pay a visit to another family's house to see how the pros do it.

Robert Clark: This house was built in 1963 for John D. Rockefeller's second wife, Martha. It's called Hillcrest. It serves as the headquarters for the Rockefeller's archives. We have about 40 people on staff.

Jonathan: [00:40:07] Yeah, it's only 38 more than us.

Robert Clark: It was actually built to withstand a nuclear war. The room that we're sitting in right now is what's known as Junior's office, meaning John D. Rockefeller Jr. who was his father's successor. This was Junior's chair that he used at this desk for almost the entirety of his career. It looks like uncomfortable but it's not too bad. It clearly was designed for somebody taller and so it actually fits me pretty well at least physically, not aesthetically.

Elan: [00:40:44] What about this room?

Robert Clark: The powder room?

Elan: Yeah.

Robert Clark: The powder room is actually an installation of furnishings from Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's townhouse in New York City. It shows how much, particularly her son, David, really adored her that he wanted there to be a piece of her left in this space for him to be able to visit.

Jonathan: Is that for real?

Elan: Yeah, they preserved their mother's powder room for eternity.

- Robert Clark: [00:41:16] In some ways a building like this is, you know, we're the winners. We get to tell the story that we want to tell.
- Elan: What We Found, Rockefeller Edition.
- Jonathan: A marble bust of John D. Rockefeller, the desk where he became the richest man in history.
- Elan: [00:41:47] A commemorative shovel from the United Nations building in New York. They gave the land.
- Jonathan: A bell from the fastest ship of her day.
- Elan: A 110-year-old wedding cake.
- Jonathan: And in the basement, the premier archive of American philanthropy.
- Robert Clark: [00:42:20] What I think people need to understand is that only the history that is saved exists into perpetuity. In some ways archivists are making a judgment as to what is important and what gets saved because in that act of saving and then making it accessible to other people you're identifying the story that you believe needs to be saved and told and understood from into the future.
- Jonathan: If we didn't have the physical remains of the past, what would be lost?
- Robert Clark: [00:42:50] I think if you didn't have the physical remains of the past the question would be whether it existed.
- Elan: So if these artifacts tell the story of history's winners, how do we tell the story of someone like grandma?
- Robert Clark: I have quite a variety of things related to my own personal family history. This is my grandmother, Opal Henderson Clark. After she passed away and we were going through her items we discovered this really strange little ledger book.
- [00:43:21] She decided to keep track of what kind and how many dozens of cookies she made during the year 1978. So we have chocolate drop cookies which are really good. We have my favorite, frosted orange cookies. Total cookie count for 1978, 280 and a third dozen cookies.
- Jonathan: Is documenting your family history as important as documenting the history of the Rockefellers?
- Bob Clark: [00:43:53] My answer to that would be sure, yes, of course. Certainly the Rockefellers and their family have had an impact far beyond what my

grandparents might have had but in the world in which they lived, my grandparents were hugely important. To make a qualitative judgment that they somehow didn't have value and so we're not going to save a record of their existence tells a kind of story that we don't want to tell about this nation which is that it's only great and wealthy people who have value. It's not the farmers. It's not the people who bake cookies for their grandchildren.

Jonathan: [00:44:27] You're really good.

Jonathan: [00:45:17] The more I think about the house, I think about the scale of big histories, like the Rockefellers and Rome and the scale of a small history like grandma's. I think about the scale of resources you need to keep a house forever and the fact that we only have six months left.

[00:45:49] And then I think about catalogues and that the house is our grandest catalogue of all. This house holds everything that remains of our family and when it's gone, what then?

Elan: [00:46:44] In every archaeological dig some artifacts are more valuable than others. Here in her basement on Hollywood Avenue, grandma spent her life making beautiful dresses for rich ladies in Manhattan. And from the leftover fabric she made the exact same dresses for herself.

[00:47:20] It's an amazing transformation. My little grandma dressed up like the Rockefellers.

Annette: I made all these dresses and hundreds more for myself and other people and they all enjoyed them. I know I did.

Marilyn: Let's just check one thing out.

Elan: I'd always wanted to see grandma in her dresses.

[00:47:52] So one night three years ago I asked my mom to help her try them on.

Marilyn: Try to step into this. It may not go up at all but you could probably step into it and I would help you. Either put it over your head and whatever it is, it is. It doesn't matter but just take it easy. Take it. Don't get nervous. We're just going to see. What do you think? We're not going to zip anything up.

[00:48:22] We never thought we would zip it up, ma. We just want to see what it looks like because that was the one dress that I always hoped that I could wear. Of course, it never happened.

Annette: Pathetic. It's made nice.

Marilyn: Yeah. It looks good. Right, ma? What was that, Pellon?

Annette: Pellon.

Marilyn: Yeah, I think that was Pellon. Very lovely.

Annette: But stiff. And then I have taffeta.

Marilyn: Underneath?

Annette: You see?

Marilyn: [00:48:52] Yeah. It's very lovely. We could just take your top off and you could just take your pants off for a second. No, first we'll take your top off because you're getting your hair done tomorrow anyway. I'll help you. Don't worry. It's not a big deal. You know what it is, ma? It just is like when do you think we made...you made this maybe in...?

Annette: Forty.

Marilyn: [00:49:22] No, no, no. It was in the 50s, ma.

Annette: Fifty?

Marilyn: Yeah, because I wanted to wear it and I couldn't wear it. So all we want to do is perhaps...

Annette: I could never get this on.

Marilyn: No, but it could get over your shoulders if you sit down. If we do it like this. No, right? It's so little, ma. Well, let's see. How could...let's take this marvelous thing that you hate so much.

Annette: Don't push anything.

Marilyn: I won't push it. That's your life alert.

Annette: Lifeline.

Marilyn: [00:49:54] All right. Now, let's think how we would do it. You don't think maybe you could step in that. If we could take your pants off...

Elan: Uh uh.

Marilyn: No.

Elan: What do you want to do? Well, we'll try it. You figure it out.

Marilyn: Well, here, ma. Let's just see. Because the only time I'm ever going to use this thing if maybe my grandchildren would wear it.

Annette: Oh, look at this with these shoes. Just trying to take my pants off.

Marilyn: Well, no, if you're going to take your pants off you have to take them off first. Let's try to take them off first and then...

Annette: [00:50:26] Oh, this is crazy.

Marilyn: It's not crazy, ma.

Annette: It is.

Marilyn: What do you mean crazy? First you have to get up, ma.

Annette: I can get up.

Marilyn: Okay. Nice chair. Herman used to wreck that chair. Right, ma?

Annette: Yeah.

Marilyn: Okay. So let's take this off. Lovely underwear. Take this schamata off and we'll try. Just try to get one dress on, just one. If we could do that, ma, it's the whole fit and I'll find one that we could do but that's my favorite in the world. Now, let us try to put your feet in here, one first.

Annette: [00:51:10] Wait, wait.

Marilyn: I got one in there. Now we're going to put the other one in. See, we'll pick that foot up.

Annette: You crazy?

Marilyn: I know I'm crazy but you know, I didn't come up with this idea, mother. Your granddaughter... Now get up and let's see.

Annette: It'll never get over me.

Marilyn: Hold in. Hold in. Remember, you used to schlep the shit out of me? Oy vey!

Annette: No, it can't get on. It's get to get on the other way.

Marilyn: Oh, okay. We'll get it on the other way. Let's try it the other way.

Annette: [00:51:42] Because the Pellon, nothing is stretched. I can never get it over. This is a difficult thing.

Marilyn: Well, hold everything. Let's see if it'll get over your head. If that could get over your head...hey, nice zipper you put in there, ma. It's a killer, huh, ma? Boy, you were skinny. Huh, ma?

Annette: No, but this is no good.

Marilyn: Well, let's try another one.

Annette: [00:52:12] This looks impossible. It's a strait jacket.

Marilyn: Oh, ma! How about this one?

Annette: That's worse.

Marilyn: Oh, it's got to zip it down the back. Oh, look, ma, it's got a big zipper. Oh, ma, this looks better.

[00:52:44] This one's beautiful. What's that one? This is silk brocade.

Annette: Ah, yeah. And you see I had to line everything.

Marilyn: I know you lined it but this one was my...this was my second favorite I dreamed of. Remember we had that dresses? We had twin dresses. Oh, you looked great in that. Here, let me help you up.

Annette: Wait a minute. This will never get over me.

Marilyn: [00:53:20] Here, just put your arms in it, that's all. This is no joke, ma. You must have been skinny.

Annette: I was.

Marilyn: Oh, ma!

Annette: I weighed 95 pounds. Now I weigh...

Marilyn: You look stunning in that. This is what we have to make a picture of. This is it, ma. Sit down for a second.

Annette: And I won't be able to get up.

Marilyn: [00:53:50] Ma, don't get nervous. Don't get nervous. You can't. What do you want me to do? Here, just take it off here and just sit on it.

Elan: She's doing good.

Marilyn: Excellent. Just sit there for a second because what she wants to do is just make...do a still. Isn't that the truth? I'll get out of the way.

Annette: With my sneakers on? This is ridiculous.

Marilyn: [00:54:26] This looks good, ma.

Annette: I'm twice the size of what I was.

Elan: You look fabulous.

Marilyn: But what'd you say when you said you feel like a what?

Annette: A clump. A clump of nothing. Big clump of flesh.

Elan: [00:55:07] Why?

Annette: Well, I don't move very easily and I don't walk well and it's difficult. I used to run to the buses and to the trains and get to school but the years have gone by and it's taken its toll. Even a tree, an oak tree, when it grows tall and big and even the wind can knock it down.

[00:55:47] So that's what happens. Whatever it is, whatever was given to me, I think I've done well. So I'm happy for it. I tried. So where does it put me? It puts me into this seat but I'm alive.

Elan: [00:56:36] So this was grandma and grandpa's room. And this is her countertop that's been pretty much the same for the last...

Nicole Bloomfield: Your whole life.

Elan: Exactly...

Nicole Bloomfield: We can't show her unmentionables.

Elan: They are really great. I know. It's really good. Oh, it's so beautiful. They don't make lingerie like that anymore. Truly, they just don't. Yep, there's the girdle.

Nicole
Bloomfield: That's the girdle.

Elan: Yeah.

Nicole: [00:57:35] Front, proper right side at waist adjacent to side seam. Approximately one inch down from waist large brown liquid stain. Front, proper right and left, underarm area, perspiration soiling. Interior back, scattered small stains.

[00:58:17] Clothing is the fastest path back in time to understanding people from before. When I'm touching it in particular I really feel transported to another space and another moment. Lace degraded, splitting, tearing especially at top.

Elan: So do you feel like you get to know the wearer?

Nicole
Bloomfield: Totally, yeah. It's very intimate. There's all these little tiny things that become apparent to me about the original owner.

[00:58:50] That whiff of perfume, a splash of red lipstick on the collar.

Elan: Did you think you were pretty throughout your life?

Annette: No. Ordinary looking person.

Nicole
Bloomfield: Sometimes I'm looking at something and the spirit or the ghost of the person really sort of like hovers around it and especially when it's sort of like a sassy object, when it's something that I know for that time period I was like oh, who are you? Where were you wearing this and why were you wearing this?

Annette: [00:59:27] Fashion transcends you into an imaginary world. I never looked the same as anyone else. My clubbed black velvet, seductive, vee neckline, a skimpy sheath.

Elan: I can envision the dress a lot.

Annette: [01:00:03] Confidence, dignity, and assurance.

Annette: Fashion was my cup of tea. I loved it.

[01:01:14] It takes us into an imaginary world.

Elan: Grandma made each dress to fit here. They're her exact outline.

Annette: [01:01:48] You can dress and look beautiful and pretend to be a princess or a queen.

Jonathan: [01:02:25] Sometimes grandma feels really present. At the beach I see her old legs and it seems like she's everywhere. Other times I can't feel her at all.

[01:02:54] I can't stop wondering if we're searching for grandma in the right places. Did we excavate right? Are we missing something? Where is she?

Alan Lightman: [01:03:12] Where does your grandmother exist now that she's dead, that you have all this footage of her and of course, you have your own memories? Well, I am a materialist so I think that everything is atoms and molecules and nothing more. And there's a special configuration of atoms and molecules that makes a brain and from that brain comes consciousness in a way that we don't yet understand.

[01:03:56] And at a certain point in time the brain dies. The atoms and molecules that were part of it disassemble. They're not destroyed. There are atoms floating around space right now that were your grandmother but they're not in the arrangement that was your grandmother.

Elan: [01:04:27] Are you scared of dying?

Annette: Pardon?

Elan: Are you scared of dying? Are you scared of dying?

Annette: How do I what?

Elan: Are you scared of dying?

Annette: Oh, no. Oh, no, never. I'm not scared of dying at all. At 86 years of age I think I'm very fortunate I've lived so long. No. Sometimes I think it would be a relief because it's getting difficult taking care of the medication and being alone. At times I do fear.

Jonathan: [01:05:11] Me, too, grandma.

Alan Lightman: A person and especially a person that you care about has a presence or meaning to you that goes far beyond their material body. The fact that I'll never talk to my father again, that I'll never see him again, that seems impossible to me.

[01:05:46] The atoms and molecules that were in his body are all in disarray. They're scattered all over the planet. Even though I could go collect each one

of those atoms and molecules I mean in principle, not actual but in principle, where is he? It's a mystery of consciousness. To me, it's the great mystery of existence.

Jonathan: [01:06:36] This entire couch was covered in mold. This is disgusting. The house is falling apart. We're running out of time. Whatever.

Jonathan: Buckets of water filled with mold.

Elan: [01:07:08] Old tax books covered with mold.

Jonathan: Herman's most recent fake teeth. I know we already found this but it's still kind of gross. There's a reason people don't keep houses they don't live in.

Elan: Bread from last year.

Jonathan: Gefilte fish from last decade.

Elan: [01:07:39] Toilet paper from last century.

Jonathan: An antique fire extinguisher. Spray it, then we'll kill you.

Elan: Furniture that reminds me of grandma.

Jonathan: A giant telescope.

Elan: Hmm. I never noticed that before.

Jonathan: [01:08:12] And then we find it, an audiotape mysteriously labeled "The Fighting Ontells".

Elan: That's our family's last name.

Tape recording: Is it off? Oh, my God, look! Press stop.

Annette: Why do you want to get married?

David: Because it's important.

Annette: To who?

Jonathan: That's our family.

David: It's no good to be single.

Annette: So what are you going to do?

David: [01:08:41] I don't know. But I can't...I mean it's no good.

Annette: Who you going to get married to?

David: The wall.

Female Voice: To who?

Annette: The wall.

Herman: You asked me a pointed question. Is it my money? Yes!

Marilyn: It's my money too.

Herman: When you going to pay me back what you owe me?

Marilyn: I got almost enough to pay you back.

Jonathan: [01:09:04] Wait a minute. For ten months we've been sifting through all these artifacts, trying to bring the past back to life. Then suddenly we turn on a tape and it's like we're back in time. Makes me think we can even see our family. Wait a minute. Let's go back. No, not that far back, just a little. Right there. That's what we need.

Elan: [01:09:41] What are you talking about?

Jonathan: With the tape we can hear the past but with the telescope maybe we can see it too.

Herman: Didn't know you needed milk because you didn't realize that they had tapped in it. They had four glasses of milk each.

Marilyn: You're full of shit.

Herman: That's what you said. You said she had four bottles...glasses of...

Marilyn: I did not say that. Liar, that you are. God damn liar.

Herman: I got news for you, you, you, you Judas you. You, you will send your mother down the river too.

Marilyn: I'd never sell my mother down the river.

Herman: But your father you would.

Marilyn: My father, I wouldn't even talk to him anymore because he's bugging the shit out of me.

Herman: But you would sell him down the river.

Marilyn: I wouldn't sell anybody down the river. Can you imagine what a paranoid person this is?

Herman: Yeah, I'm paranoid.

Marilyn: [01:10:34] Did you ever in your life, a paranoid nitwit.

Jonathan: Whoaa....

Elan: Can we see anything else?

Marilyn: [01:10:52] Press them down at the same time. When you record something, when you want to stop it you just stop, stop. When you want to rewind, you rewind it. You rewind to the point where you think you started speaking and then you play back.

[01:11:09] Play back, just stick play. But the only other thing is when you want to record you have a little arrow here. Record goes hand in hand with play.

Elan: They're so young.

Jonathan: They sound like people from an old movie. That was mommy making the tape.

Marilyn: [01:11:34] Well, keep going out with her.

David: [01:11:35] I can't. Sooner or later it's going to...

Annette: Might as well get used to her.

Elan: Wow! It's our Uncle David.

David: I can't go out with her...How long can you go out with a girl?

Marilyn: You can go out with her for five years.

Annette: Chevalier went with a woman for 40 years.

David: I don't make enough money to get married.

Marilyn: So what do you want to get married for?

David: I don't think I'll ever make enough money. I don't believe I'll ever reach a ten thousand bracket.

David: [01:12:05] Can't make it in that company. You just can't make it. It's not even a job.

Marilyn: Well, what do you call it?

David: It's a patsy job. I mean they don't want to recognize me as there. They got such schmucks in that outfit. I don't know where the hell they...nobody believes me around here.

Annette: Want a lousy little tomato or you don't like it?

Marilyn: What do you mean nobody believes? I believe you.

Annette: Hey, I believe you.

David: [01:12:38] I don't get it. I don't know what the hell's the matter with this company.

Annette: Gonna try to figure it out?

David: What'd they do? Pay off or scandal?

Annette: They need you for a certain purpose.

David: Yeah, but it's not right. I mean the guy that doesn't procrastinate... these guys don't show any...they get promoted. It must be a payoff.

Marilyn: What kind of a payoff? Who they going to pay off?

David: Well, there must be something, brown nosing or I don't know what the hell it is. And the funny thing about it, they just took a salesman and put him into management and, uh, he's making less in management now than he was as a salesman and he took the job, like a jerk. [01:13:21] Hard-up bastard. I don't get it.

[01:13:25] What the hell am I working for there? Killing myself.

Annette: Look, I'm killing myself too over you. It's not right.

David: What the hell did I do?

Annette: Oh, I try to help you out a little bit.

David: Oh, you shouldn't.

Annette: I take care of you a little bit.

David: I take care of myself.

Elan: [01:14:11] When you lose someone you love, you start to look for new ways to understand the world. Grandma's death makes me believe that some part of the past still exists and it makes me wonder if time only moves in one direction.

Jan Gadeyne: You have a layering in your house that allows you to walk through the different phases that it has been used for.

Alan Lightman: [01:14:58] Well, I think if you had a family that had been living in a house for many years, I think there would be many versions of time for the different inhabitants. We can imagine a world in which there is no time, only images. We can imagine a world in which time moves backwards. We can imagine a world in which times moves in circles and every event is repeated exactly an infinite number of times.

[01:15:44] I think the physical relativity of time has no bearing on our subjective experience.

Elan: If you were to create a short summary of your life, how would you do it?

Annette: It's been a success. My life has been a success. I achieved having a good credit line. I pay my bills on time. I have a good reputation.

Elan: [01:16:16] I imagine a time that behaves differently where I can do the impossible, walk from behind the camera and touch her.

Annette: [Hope] it's the little thing that's attached. I'm starting to cough. It lets me.

Elan: Yeah, I will definitely bring you some water.

Annette: No, don't worry about that. No.

Elan: [01:16:54] I want her to be alive.

Annette: I remember that very vividly. I remember it so vividly. Don't tell me you're recording? Yes, you are recording. I don't even sound like that to my own ears.

Marilyn: That's the way you sound.

Annette: Do I really?

Marilyn: Do I sound the way I sound on this?

Annette: Yeah, exactly. So then we got to really hear ourselves properly, the way, when we come over. [01:17:29] It's a strange person.

Marilyn: Yup.

Annette: Oh, my God, what a revelation. It's exciting.

Marilyn: Yeah. I tell you --

Annette: I wonder if some people are disappointed.

Marilyn: Yeah, I was when I first heard my voice a long time ago.

Annette: I'm sort of disappointed. What can you do? You got to accept yourself. Let me get the salad going so we can eat. I'll get the chicken out.

[01:18:01] It's all I ever talk about is food, food, food because I'm constantly preparing. Oh, Mavi, Mavi, what's going to be from this family?

Marilyn: Nothing.

Annette: We'll just go, leave this earth, not a sign or a mark. The fighting Ontells. Eh!

Jonathan: [01:18:49] Eleven months have come and gone. We prepared for this day but now that it's here we just can't sell the house. I'm not ready. Not one of us is ready to let go.

Jonathan: [01:19:20] One year after grandma's death I get married in Japan. Our mother semi retires.

Marilyn: I don't feel like my age.

Jonathan: My daughter, Ayumi, is born. Elan gets married.

[01:19:53] Our lives are passing just as grandma said. And through it all we keep the house. Sixteen years after we started filming grandma and six years after she died I hear her calling me.

Annette: [01:20:23] Remember, remember. Try to go back.

Jonathan: [01:21:06] I find myself back in Rome reliving a memory from the past. I once visited the Casanatense library. A woman named Isabella showed me beautiful manuscripts in the great hall. While we were talking, the director of the library entered the room and told me a story I've never forgotten.

Rita Fioravanti: [01:21:39] [Italian speaking - translated in film to the following English] When I had my first experience I was very young. My greatest dream was to remain locked-up in the library for a week and be able to browse, see, touch everything in complete freedom. Obviously, this would've been impossible because it would've caused chaos. But it had the enchantment of embarking on a journey.

Jonathan: [01:22:12] She told me of the most important figure in the library's history, the great 18th century librarian, Giovanni Battista Audiffredi. Audiffredi was given an enormous task, to create a catalogue of every book in the library's collection.

Rita Fioravanti: [01:22:35] [Italian speaking - translated in film to the following English] If we didn't have a catalogue especially in a library, we would lose access to knowledge itself.

Jonathan: Audiffredi worked on his catalogue for over 40 years. He imagined a way to organize information that we use to this day. He spent his entire life pursuing his goal.

[01:23:09] But when he died, an old man at the age of 84, he had only reached the letter L. This is his final entry. And this is his life's work. We too have reached our end. We have reached our letter L.

Alan Lightman: [01:25:19] A house is a universe. It's an entire world. And it's always amazed me when I go to the sites of houses that I know where the house has been removed, it's always astonishing and appalling and outrageous that the footprint is so small.

[01:25:59] It's like taking all of the stars in the galaxy and putting them in a thimble, to see all of that life put into a few hundred square feet on the ground.

Annette: [01:27:09] Wait just a minute. I don't know what happened with the gefilte fish I put in the...

Elan: Grandma, no one cares about the gefilte fish. Grandma, grandma, come on.

Annette: Okay.

Elan: The gefilte fish is unnecessary. Come.

Marilyn: Sit down here, ma. Can we sit down for a second. Sit down over here, ma.

Annette: [I] see.

[01:27:42] [Happy Birthday song]

Annette: Thank you. Oh, what a beautiful cake!

Marilyn: [01:28:14] You have to make a wish, ma. You made it?

Annette: Yeah.

Marilyn: Okay. [You can take a little time though].

[End of recorded material 01:34:11]