

And the Universe Didn't Blink

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## And the Universe Didn't Blink

Cast: 3 (2f, 1 m)

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**Otto Schmidt** (male; ageless; could be shown in his prime – in his 30's or 40's or beyond works) past vigorous Russian explorer, mathematician, astronomer. Learner. Larger than life – physically, emotionally, intellectually. (He was 42 when he led the Chelyuskin expedition. We needn't be literal.) OTTO'S story is taken from Russian history – but the fanciful is all from the playwright. Fun Fact: He's a second cousin of mine.

**Miranda** (female) (15) Lost in a sea of change, Miranda's a bit like a porcupine. Her grief over her father's death two years ago is reignited when her mother remarries.

**Elsie** (female) (60's+), Miranda's sensible great-aunt who suffers from crushing anxiety.

**Voice** (male, 60-ish) – phone recordings from Arnie (never seen)

**Place:** A small apartment and the Arctic Ice.

### **Time**

Summer, today

### **Scenes:**

The play takes place over five days. There are quick changes between ELSIE'S apartment and the polar ice. That can be accomplished simply with lighting. The scenes in ELSIE'S apartment are during the summer – today. The scenes in the arctic are in March, 1934 (the actual time of the sinking of the Chelyuskin and one of the many times that OTTO lived on the ice).

### **Synopsis**

Grief comes in all forms. Otto Schmidt grieves for the lost of his "glory years," Elsie grieves for her past independence, and fifteen year-old Miranda dwells in the past. Any past – as long as the world is prior to her father's death 2 years ago. Reeling from her mother's remarriage, Miranda spends a week with her great aunt and acquaints herself with an ancestor from her father's past – the Russian Polar explorer Otto Schmidt.

In the confines of Elsie's apartment, Miranda travels back and forth to the North Pole gleaning information about the nature of the universe, loss and ever-lasting presence. As Miranda visits Otto in the past, Elsie is struggling to maintain the equilibrium she is barely holding to since her sister's death. Trying to keep her crushing anxiety at bay, Elsie tries to give Miranda remembrance and closure.

But Miranda will have none of it. She turns to the stars and devises a physics theory that she thinks will bring her face-to-face with her father one more time. But it's problematic - in order for it to work you need to travel faster than the speed of light. During her debates with Otto about the origins of the universe, Miranda carves a way to bring her back into the world.

**Running Time:** 75-80 minutes

**NOTES:**

The play moves back and forth from today to 1934. Maybe it's in Miranda's mind, maybe she is daydreaming and just maybe it is happening. These are choices the actress and director can make.

The play can be staged simply in a black box using set pieces and the changes to the arctic can be made through lighting. If the lighting is not available, simply set aside a portion of the stage designated as the arctic. Because the play is episodic in nature, set changes are not advised.

The "sounds" of the arctic are optional. The ship's horn blaring is necessary and is an easy sound effect.

When the scene shifts to the arctic, it will always be a starry night.

## And the Universe Didn't Blink

### Scene 1

Lights come up in ELSIE'S small living room of her two bedroom condominium on Columbus Avenue and 81st Street, New York City. It is Elsie's North Pole. A hallway leads to the bedrooms and another doorway leads to the kitchen. There is a small kitchen table with a large folder of take-out menus just outside the entrance to the kitchen. An old trunk has been hauled into the middle of the living room. It contains the papers and books relating to the history of OTTO SCHMIDT. It's about 9 p.m. on a summer Saturday night.

The apartment is sparse – frozen in time from years ago. There are photos of Steven (MIRANDA'S father) and a few of Helga (MIRANDA'S grandmother) and of Otto (MIRANDA'S distant cousin). ELSIE enters with a fabric bag of groceries. She starts to unpack them on the kitchen table and we see sugary cereals, chips and soda. Treats that would maybe please a seven year-old girl.)

ELSIE

What do I know about teenage girls? (*Beat.*) Nothing!

(She also has a bag of small brown paper bags. She will always have one – stashed in a pocket and hidden throughout her home. She runs around her apartment stashing more little paper bags all over. They are her lifelines. ELSIE takes out a small paper bag and breathes deeply into it then folds it up and replaces it in her pocket. A buzzer rings. ELSIE takes another breath into the bag and answers the buzzer.)

ELSIE

Breathe! (*SHE does so.*) Again. (*SHE does so.*) Miranda? I'm buzzing you in. Take the elevator to the top. I'll be there.

(ELSIE buzzes in and flies around the apartment hoping all is in order. She lovingly and deliberately kisses her fingers and touches the photos of Steven (her nephew), Helga (her sister) and Otto (distant cousin/ancestor). It is one of her routines. There is a knock on the door and she answers it. MIRANDA enters. She has one large suitcase, a laptop, and carries a caffeinated beverage. ELSIE moves to help with her luggage but MIRANDA holds back.)

MIRANDA

I got it. (*Beat.*) Thanks.

ELSIE

I hope you didn't mind me sending the car service to get you. I worked late today – and the museum uses them all the time for special guests. And ... you're a special guest! It was gracious of them to let me use their service, don't you think?

MIRANDA

Yeah. Really loved seeing a sign with my name on it held by a total stranger – I really felt welcomed.

ELSIE

Yes. Well ... I do try. Come ... sit down. How are you? You're not cold are you? I know it's summer but I keep the a.c. on pretty high. I could lower it if you'd like. If you're cold. Are you cold?

MIRANDA

I live in Minneapolis. Being cold is a way of life.

ELSIE

Good. The flight? How was it? You didn't have much of that turbulence, did you? I hated that. When I flew. Of course, I don't fly anymore.

MIRANDA

I love flying in a metal tube that looks like a toothpaste container. And then there's that floating cushion to save you if you crash. The feeling of safety is overwhelming.

ELSIE

Which is why I stopped flying. What do you think? Does the place seem smaller than you remember? You haven't been here since – your Grandmother died.

MIRANDA

I don't remember all those photos of Grandma – what are those medals?

ELSIE

Helga's first place in a swimming relay and then second place in the science fair her senior year in high school – she investigated the brightness of starlight and how it changed with distance – quite innovative for a student in its day.

MIRANDA

So Grandma was cool. Who knew? Who knew? Whoa! How many photos of my father do you have?

ELSIE

I love them. Look, these are from his fishing expedition in Alaska. They were so good that National Geographic offered him a job.

MIRANDA

It's kind of— morbid. Like a shrine. Oh! You and me!

ELSIE

When you were seven. The last time you were here.

MIRANDA

And Dad and me.

(SHE turns the photo down.)

And Dad and me.

(SHE turns the photo down.)

And yet another.

(SHE turns the photo down.)

None with my mother.

ELSIE

Your Dad sent those. I'm sure you have some with your mother... How is your mother?

MIRANDA

Whooping it up on the Virgin Islands with her new husband. That's why I'm here.

ELSIE

Well ... maybe we can "whoop it up in New York!"

(MIRANDA just stares.)

Or -... just be quiet together. Are you still making collages? I remember all those cut-outs you created of the lakes with your Dad. You and your father could create for hours.

MIRANDA

No.

ELSIE

How's ... school? Still a stellar student?

MIRANDA

Aunt Elsie – we don't have to chit-chat. I appreciate you letting me stay here but I'm not very good at "talk" these days.

ELSIE

I understand. Why don't you get settled and I'll scrounge around for something for you to eat. I don't really cook. I'm afraid I'm like most New Yorkers - I live on take-out.

MIRANDA

I can cook.

ELSIE

Your mother told me that. Are you gluten-free? Vegan? Are there any foods that you hate? Because I will avoid them.

MIRANDA

Take-out. Not wild about take-out.

ELSIE

Oh! Well – I'll only do take-out from places that promise "homemade!" How's that? (*Beat.*) I'll see what I can manage. I arranged for you to meet the daughter of a colleague of mine. She's about your age –

MIRANDA

Please do not arrange a play-date for me.

ELSIE

I just thought – to get you out – it's the end of the quarter at the museum. A lot of financials are due. I can't take any time off.

MIRANDA

That works – we won't get in each other's way.

ELSIE

I thought you could go to work with me tomorrow. Explore the Museum of Natural History. The Planetarium's right next door, You could explore the universe!

MIRANDA

I have the universe right here in my laptop. You *do* have Wifi don't you?

ELSIE

Yes, I have Wifi. Your mother called to make sure.

MIRANDA

Then I'm set. You can ignore me all week.

ELSIE

I have no intention of ignoring you -

MIRANDA

I like being ignored. It's much better than being "entertained" – Greg does that.

ELSIE

Your stepfather –

MIRANDA

The man who is on his honeymoon with my mother.

ELSIE

Yes.

(Beat.)

MIRANDA

Am I in Grandma's room? The room where she died?

ELSIE

Yes ... it's been cleaned. Oh! When I was refreshing her room – I found the old trunk. Remember? You and your Dad would go through the family history – all the stuff about Otto Schmidt. Remember your father pretending to be Otto on a polar expedition – doing that awful Russian accent/

MIRANDA

/Don't remember.

ELSIE

I see. I would like to take you to the museum tomorrow. Would you like that?

MIRANDA

No. Thank-you. I'll visit it on my computer. I can visit a café in Paris at 10 a.m. and be in the North Pole at Noon. That's enough for me.

ELSIE

I'll turn down your bed.

MIRANDA

I can do it.

(MIRANDA exits with her suitcase. ELSIE looks at a photo of OTTO.)



ELSIE

Well, Otto. That went well, don't you think?

(ELSIE takes out a paper bag and breathes.  
MIRANDA enters. ELSIE hurriedly stashes  
The bag in her pocket.)

MIRANDA

May I make a pot of coffee? I brought my own.

ELSIE

It's a bit late for that.

MIRANDA

Not for me.

ELSIE

Excuse me.

(ELSIE fingers her little paper bag and abruptly exits.  
MIRANDA goes to the trunk in the living room. She opens  
it and looks at a paper or two and holds up a photo of Otto.  
She does remember. She hears ELSIE return and quickly  
closes the trunk but she's still holding the photo.)

ELSIE (cont'd)

I love that photo. He was quite imposing.

MIRANDA

That huge beard – gross! Probably filled with food.

ELSIE

It was rather bushy. Not at all like the sleek “Lenin mustaches” everyone else sported. I thought - you might like to get reacquainted with him. He was quite famous back in the day and you do share a last name.

MIRANDA

(Reading an excerpt from a book or a paper.)

“Otto Schmidt – Editor of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, physicist, polar explorer ...”  
Sounds like a cliffhanger. Why are you pushing this stuff on me?

ELSIE

He's your history. Your family. He captured the fancy of young girls – they'd cut out pictures of him from magazines and hang them over their beds.

MIRANDA

Seriously? He's not exactly - hot.

ELSIE

He was a hero – he led an expedition on a ship that became known as the Soviet Titanic.

MIRANDA

A sinking ship. So appropriate for this family.

ELSIE

Stevie was fascinated by Otto. Especially that polar expedition where everything went wrong. And “Otto saved the day!”

MIRANDA

Life will go a lot easier this week if we avoid discussing my father, deal?

ELSIE

He was my nephew. I did help raise him. Am I allowed to mention your mother? Life's been hard the last two years. For you – and your mother.

MIRANDA

Tell that to the woman who just got married.

ELSIE

Some people – need to be married – like your mother. And your grandmother.

MIRANDA

*That* didn't work out.

ELSIE

Your grandmother married a bum. And threw him out when she realized her mistake.

MIRANDA

Maybe we're cursed – to grow up without fathers. Do you ever feel like that? Like we're all cursed?

ELSIE

Life does deliver challenges. Is there something I can fix for you? I bought you some stuff for a late-night snack.

(She shows Miranda the junk food.)

MIRANDA

Are you serious? You do know this stuff is full of empty calories that will send you to an early grave. Where you won't decompose.

ELSIE

Yes. What was I thinking? I also have organic pizza with goat cheese and vegetables? The fridge is stacked with carton boxes. Of organic, just-like-homemade take-out.

MIRANDA

I'm good with coffee.

ELSIE

It is getting late for caffeine.

MIRANDA

Caffeine doesn't affect me like it does old people. (Beat.) Look – I know I say a lot of the wrong things and this is kind of – awkward. I'm being thrown at you and you're my great-aunt who I barely know and I get that you don't know what to do with me – just like everyone else. Maybe I'll skip the coffee and just go to my room.

ELSIE

Absolutely. Let me show you -

MIRANDA

It's funny. I remember Grandma's room. It's Grandma I'm starting to forget. Is that normal? To forget people once they're gone?

ELSIE

I don't have an easy answer to that. (Whisper) Night little Rybka....

MIRANDA

What?

ELSIE

Nothing ... slipped out.

MIRANDA

My father ...

ELSIE

We called him that.

MIRANDA

*He* called me that. Little Rybka.

ELSIE

Little fish. He always squirmed ... oh dear Lord.

(ELSIE moves to hug MIRANDA who immediately steps away. MIRANDA takes all her things and exits to Helga's

bedroom. ELSIE takes a deep breath. She takes out a bag and looks at it.)

ELSIE (cont'd)

And your father would echo back, "Back at you, Rybka. Back at you, Big Fish."

(And she breathes into the bag. A landline rings in the kitchen. The answering machine picks it up.)

VOICE

Hi, Elsie. It's Arnie. Remember the photography exhibit I told you about on Friday? I just found out that tomorrow is the last day and if you wanted to see it – I could take you. I know your young niece is visiting and I'd be happy to take her also. Just call me back on my cell phone! Did you hear that? I have a cell phone! I joined the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And you know what's even better? It's a "smart" phone – smarter than me! So call me. Or I'll call you back. My number is – 646 – that's the area code – it's a new one, 823-8693. Got it? 646-823-8693. I think. It's hard to read. Or call me on my landline. Bye, Elsie. Nice talking with you.

(ELSIE listens and shakes her head. SHE goes into the living room, puts the downturned photos back up and lovingly touches them. SHE exits.)

(OTTO enters and goes to the trunk and flips through some papers. He is delighted with those that inform of his heroics in the arctic. MIRANDA peeks in and then enters with her laptop. She takes a paper from the trunk. She uses it to look up information on her computer.)

OTTO

Look up "Hero of the Soviet Union." I'm there. There's an island in the Kara Sea named after me! As well as a planet. True, it's just a minor planet – but still an honor. Find me. I've been too long forgotten.

(MIRANDA listens and then shakes her head and looks at the paper.)

Come on, do some research. We're blood. You know you want to know more.

(MIRANDA think and then looks at the paper and starts to type. OTTO spells it out.)

C-h-e-l-y-u-s-k-i-n. There it is! Scroll just a bit. The Chelyuskin! A ship that I refitted to crash through the arctic ice! I was so sure that I would be the one to forge a new trade route for the Soviet Union. I would succeed where others failed. I could do no wrong. I spent a lot of time congratulating myself.

(The lights change to the arctic.)

OTTO (cont'd)

I intended to sail to the Bering Strait without having to winter in Siberia. Who wants to winter in Siberia? I would succeed where others failed. I had months of supplies – I had thought of everything.

We were within one mile of the Bering Sea. We could see open water. Applause rang out on deck – all in celebration ... of what we had *not* yet accomplished.

(OTTO is now on his ship. A ship horn blares loudly. MIRANDA suddenly sits up. This is the first time she sees and hears him. OTTO is busy evacuating the ship. You may use as many or as few sound effects as you wish to cover the evacuation. We are now in this in-between world of “then” and “now.” A world Miranda will frequent during her stay at ELSIE’S.)

**/EVERYONE – GET ON THE ICE! ON TO THE ICE! WOMEN AND CHILDREN FIRST! THEN THE RADIO! GRAB THE SUPPLIES AND GET OFF THE SHIP!**

(OTTO looks at MIRANDA.)

OTTO

Don’t just stand there! Grab something and abandon ship!

(OTTO starts to exit – barking out orders on “the ship.”)

OTTO

Make yourself useful! Everyone works! ERNST! THE RADIO! GET IT OFF! THE TENTS GO NEXT - every bag of food must make it on the ice – gently – it’s slippery – I will help –

(MIRANDA puts a throw blanket around her for comfort as the ship horn blares. It will then turn into a more mournful sound and become more distant. OTTO exits as the ship horn dies down and MIRANDA falls asleep. The lights fade to black.)

## **SCENE 2**

(ELSIE enters dressed for the day. ELSIE tiptoes in the dark – likely making more noise than if she just walked into the room. She walks into the living room and touches the photo of Steven, Helga and Otto. She takes note of MIRANDA sleeping in the living room She goes to the

kitchen, stubs her toe and drops her purse. The phone rings.  
ELSIE answers the phone.)

ELSIE

Hello. Hi, Rose. No, you didn't wake me. Miranda? She got in late last night safe and sound. I believe she's sleeping. Did you want me to wake her? Yes, I'll tell her to call you. Everything all right with you? And Greg? Good. Talk to you later. Yes, I'll tell her! Bye.

(ELSIE looks for her purse and finding it makes her way to the door – jingling her keys and making noise.)

MIRANDA

Aunt Elsie? Are you trying to wake the dead?

ELSIE

I'm getting ready to go out. Quietly. Your mother called.

MIRANDA

How nice for her.

ELSIE

What are you doing in the living room?

MIRANDA

Reading.

ELSIE

About Otto?

MIRANDA

I can't figure him out. You talk about him as a hero – but all I can see is some guy on an ego trip making a dumb decision to take pregnant women and children to the arctic and then sinking his ship. *Then* he claims he saves everyone. Isn't there a disease like that – where you cause a catastrophe and then save everyone?

ELSIE

Stevie was fascinated by him.

MIRANDA

I thought we'd agreed not to mention my father.

ELSIE

It's hard not to when I have his daughter right here. What's wrong with mentioning him?

MIRANDA

I keep him inside. I'm not letting him out.

ELSIE

I'll - try. I thought I'd go out and get us some bagels and lox. It's a New York Sunday tradition. It's takeout – but very special. And I'll pick up something for dinner. I found a recipe! It'll be homemade. (Beat.) I do still want to take you to the Dinosaur Exhibit at the museum. It was redone last year and is quite thrilling.

MIRANDA

Dinosaurs? I'm not exactly an eight-year-old boy ...

ELSIE

Neither am I but I do love the glimpse of our long-ago world.

MIRANDA

Are you looking for bonding time or something?

ELSIE

I'm looking – to get you out of the apartment before I go back to work tomorrow.

MIRANDA

All right. I'll hang out with you and the dinosaurs.

ELSIE

Good. I'll be right back. You might want to get dressed. And – call your mother.

MIRANDA

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ELSIE

Any particular flavor bagel you like?

MIRANDA

Blueberry. I like blueberry bagels.

ELSIE

Blueberry bagels and lox – different.

(ELSIE exits. MIRANDA gets up. The phone rings.)

MIRANDA

I'm not answering, Mom. I'm on vacation, too.

VOICE

Elsie? It's Arnie again. Just checking on the photography exhibit. I heard it was pretty remarkable – New York City in the 20's and 30's and well – I know you like that sort of stuff – so – give me a call. On my new cell phone. You should get a cell phone, Elsie. Then I wouldn't

VOICE (cont'd)

have to leave messages on your answering machine. Bye, Elsie. Oh! 646-823-8693. That's my cell phone. Call it. I need to see if it works.

MIRANDA

Arnie? Who's Arnie?

(SHE gathers up the folders from last night and looks at a photo of OTTO. OTTO enters and we are in the arctic.)

OTTO

ERNST! I told you to dismantle the radio! Without the radio, we are lost!

(He addresses the people on the ship. All are getting supplies off the ship.)

Are the women and children on the ice? And the food – the heaters? The tools! Grab the crowbars and the shovels and then GET OFF! Ernst! Contact Moscow later. Get the radio off! That's an order! Seaman Youstevich – put some of that down – I will take it – Seaman Youstevich! Man overboard! MAN OVERBOARD!

(A car horn blares and we hear a crash.)

MIRANDA

DADDY!

(OTTO approaches.)

OTTO

Get off the ship!

MIRANDA

I need to find my father. He's hurt!

OTTO

Get on the ice!

MIRANDA

I'll slip –

OTTO

I'll help you -

MIRANDA

My father –



The ship is sinking –

OTTO

I can't leave him –

MIRANDA

(OTTO holds out his hand.)

Come here.

OTTO

(MIRANDA looks at OTTO and takes his hand and looks out. There is a sound of waves.)

You're safe.

(MIRANDA looks out over the ice as the lights fade to black.)

### SCENE 3

(We are in the apartment. Keys are heard by the front door. ELSIE and MIRANDA enter.)

ELSIE

The height of the barosaurus always amazes me. Imagine meeting him in the jungle!

MIRANDA

It's a bag of bones.

ELSIE

Exactly! Refitted and put together expertly. Truly an amazement.

(MIRANDA sits and plugs herself into her computer or phone. ELSIE takes note.)

ELSIE (cont'd)

Dinner should be ready. I threw everything into a slow cooker. Helga used it all the time – I don't know why I never have!

(The phone rings. ELSIE looks at Caller ID.)

It's your Mother.

(MIRANDA shakes her head “no” and goes into the living room.)

ELSIE (cont’d)

Hello? Hi Rose. I’m fine. And you and Greg? Good. Miranda? She’s - well. No – sorry – she’s – in the shower. We were out and about and New York can get quite grimy in the summer... yes, of course I told her to call you! I know but you must understand that I cannot put my hand on hers and press in your phone number. She’s not a toddler. Yes, Rose - I’ll tell her. Now try and enjoy your honeymoon, all right? Yes.... Yes. Bye.

(ELSIE returns to cooking and MIRANDA peeks in.)

MIRANDA

All clear?

ELSIE

She said to tell you that she loves you. You should call her.

MIRANDA

Would you want to hear from your kid on your honeymoon?

ELSIE

Yes.

MIRANDA

Dinner ready?

ELSIE

I hope so.

MIRANDA

What is it?

ELSIE

It’s a hot dish! I read that you eat a lot of those in Minnesota. It’s homemade!

MIRANDA

Looks – scary. Like – zombie flesh. What’s in it?

ELSIE

Noodles, ground beef, peas and French dressing.

MIRANDA

The peas are cold. How can the peas be cold in a hot dish?

ELSIE

The directions said to put everything into the slow cooker and cook on low for six hours. Maybe I should have defrosted the peas before I threw them in? I don't know. I've never had a hot dish.

MIRANDA

Did you even brown the meat?

ELSIE

Are you supposed to?

MIRANDA

Did you even turn the cooker on?

(ELSIE checks.)

ELSIE

Of course I did – it's on low ... oh! *Don't eat it!* It's not plugged in. Leftover pizza? Leftover sesame noodles? What do you think?

MIRANDA

I think I'll take a look at your junk food bag.

ELSIE

You know, Miranda – you could meet me halfway. I've done nothing but try to please you and frankly – it's exhausting.

MIRANDA

*You're trying to please me?* Give me a break! I spent the whole day pleasing you in a dinosaur graveyard!

ELSIE

You liked the show at the planetarium.

MIRANDA

Fake stars. Everything's fake!

ELSIE

We prefer to say "simulated."

MIRANDA

Why do you need that when you have the sky?

ELSIE

There is a program actually – where you go out and look at the night sky –

MIRANDA

Why a program? Why not just go outside and look at the stars?

ELSIE

The program's a guide. So you know what you are looking at.

(MIRANDA puts in her earbuds.)

ELSIE

Don't - turn yourself off. Talk to me. We need to talk.

MIRANDA

When an adult says something like that – it usually means, “I need to tell you something you don't want to hear” or “I want to give you advice you don't need.” So if it's all right with you – I'd rather not.

(MIRANDA exits.

ELSIE takes out a brown paper bag and breathes into it. We hear sounds from the arctic. OTTO appears. ELSIE does not see or hear him – maybe she once did – but not anymore. But she may feel his presence.)

OTTO

Elsie ... sweet Elsie. So many plans. So many dreams.

(ELSIE listens intently. Her breathing becomes more regular and easy as OTTO speaks. Maybe – she is connecting to a memory as OTTO speaks.)

Remember that story you told Stevie? How you and Helga originally came from the constellations Ursa Major and Ursa Minor? And just as Ursa Major and Ursa Minor cared for Zeus – you two cared for Stevie. Stardust. You were always enchanted by the idea of being stardust. And you are. You, Helga and Steven are still bound together by early stardust. That will never change even though they are gone.

(Now calm, ELSIE starts to clear the table, stops, goes into the living room, touches the photos and exits.)

Sweet dreams, Rybka. I am still here for you.

(The lights turn to the arctic. MIRANDA appears.)

OTTO (cont'd)

The sun is down. Don't be afraid. Come out. It is beautiful, isn't it? The purity. The isolation. The spectacle that the sky puts on in the evening.

MIRANDA

The stars. I want to be up there with them.

OTTO

But they may not be there.

MIRANDA

Of course they are! I can see them!

OTTO

What you are seeing is what they looked like in the past. The stars are so far away it takes years for their light to reach us. A star could be burned out and we wouldn't know that for hundreds of years.

MIRANDA

We are looking into the past.

OTTO

Yes.

MIRANDA

That's – awesome!

OTTO

Even when you look at the sun, you're seeing how it looked eight minutes ago.

MIRANDA

So, if I want to see the sun as it is now – I have to wait eight minutes?

OTTO

Yes.

MIRANDA

And the light coming at me from a star could have started beaming in the sky when the pyramids were being built? And some of those stars could have burned out when the wagon trains were going across the country?

OTTO

All that is possible.

MIRANDA

So - for sure - there is starlight just reaching me from two years ago.

OTTO

Definitely.

MIRANDA

I am seeing light from when my father was still alive. There's a star up there who still sees my father. Somewhere in its light – is my father.

OTTO

That's not a scientific conclusion.

MIRANDA

No. It's a beginning. I've spent the last two years living with an ending and now you've given me a beginning.

OTTO

A beginning of what?

MIRANDA

Of seeing what they see. Seeing my father.

OTTO

That's more science fiction than science I'm afraid.

MIRANDA

You never know. It's what I will take into my dreams tonight.

(MIRANDA starts to run off.)

OTTO

Careful! Don't slip!

(MIRANDA takes note and exits to her room. The lights fade to black.)

#### **SCENE 4**

It is the next morning in the apartment. ELSIE enters dressed for work. She touches her photos, grabs her purse, fabric bag and exits.

MIRANDA peeks in and seeing that ELSIE is gone enters. She holds a purse-sized mirror in her hand. MIRANDA perches the mirror – somewhere. Maybe she stands on a chair or a table holding it high. As she hangs up the mirror, the lights change to the arctic. MIRANDA holds her mirror high as if in the stars. OTTO enters.

OTTO

You'll never see your reflection with the mirror up that high.

MIRANDA

Is it true what you said last night? That when we look at the stars we are looking into the past?

OTTO

I said it was possible.

MIRANDA

If that's true – then the past could be looking down on us. The way we were a few years ago.

OTTO

There are lots of variables. One cannot be sure.

MIRANDA

I need to do that – look down on the world as it was a few years ago.

OTTO

It would be easier to take a photograph and look at that.

MIRANDA

A photograph doesn't have a heartbeat. I want to look back at life and see its beating heart. Is *that* possible?

OTTO

My dear, all things are possible. We are only limited by what we understand so far.

MIRANDA

Suppose I hung a mirror on a star – would it reflect back to me the earth as it was years ago?

OTTO

You could never hang a mirror on a star. It would burn up.

MIRANDA

An inflammable mirror – just suppose!

OTTO

Assuming you could hang a mirror on a star and assuming you can get it there faster than the speed of light – and assuming that a telescope could magnify its reflection - I suppose one could conceive of it. It is a bit fanciful. The universe is expanding. Even if you did travel at the speed of light, the light would always be just beyond reach.

MIRANDA

My head is spinning!

OTTO

Physics will do that. *If* – as you say – the mirror was in place and *if* there was a telescope that could easily view what the mirror reflected and if so many other variables occurred – what you propose is possible. But as of today – the laws of physics say that while you can see the past in the sky, you cannot view the past here on earth.

MIRANDA

But the possibility exists?

OTTO

It may be possible in a more advanced time. But not today.

MIRANDA

Don't you understand? That's all I need to go on – knowing that someday in my lifetime – it may be possible.

OTTO

Of course the further you go in the future – the harder it will be to glimpse that past.

MIRANDA

Don't do that! Don't hold out hope and snatch it away!

OTTO

Do you want the science or the fairy-tale?

MIRANDA

I want – the scientific fairy-tale - where the heroine meets her father one last time and talks to him. My happily-ever-after.

OTTO

If you want to propose a theory to find the past, learn your facts. Analyze what you know. Ask questions. But don't expect an answer overnight. I worked on a theory for decades.

MIRANDA

Decades! I'm only here for a week!

OTTO

A good theory will keep you going for decades. Take what you learn here and carry it home with you.

MIRANDA

But I'm here now. With you. You can help me find my father.

OTTO

It's the theory that's important. Your theory will be with you wherever you are. It will excite you. Tease you. Consume you. There is a wonder in waking up with the knowledge that today



OTTO (cont'd)

could be the day you make the final connection, the final proof of your theory. Why, I worked on the origins of the universe for years. I imagined/

MIRANDA

/Wait! Imagined? What do you mean imagined? Isn't that a little fanciful? Where are your facts?

OTTO

Didn't I say that in the early stages you need imagination for your theory?

MIRANDA

No.

OTTO

Oh. I should have. I did imagine the early days of the universe – what did it look like? Dust and matter colliding for years -

(OTTO could take out paper and crush it into a ball – use what materials are around or in the trunk to act out his theory. Or not.)

OTTO (cont'd)

–until eventually – our sun passes through a dust cloud attracting more and more pieces of matter – and then that matter - became planets. It's exciting – this theorizing!

MIRANDA

You do get worked up!

OTTO

Of course! It's science - a way of having a conversation with the universe! First the brain starts popping and then the body joins in this brain dance!

(OTTO spins with his paper snowball.)

Imagine these tiny planets just spinning. And as they spin - they acquire more and more matter – a tiny particle that will be part of Elsie, a bit of Miranda! A touch of Helga.

(OTTO spins MIRANDA in a joyful, twirling dance.)

OTTO (cont'd)

Spinning as a snowball does - as it careens down a hill – gathering snow until the tiny snowball is a massive snowman – and then finally - a frozen planet! Which would slowly warm up and produce life.

(MIRANDA enjoys the interlude as they spin and finally collapse on the ice.)

MIRANDA

How long would it take - this acquiring of matter - to become planets?

OTTO

What did you say?

MIRANDA

Did it take one year? 20 years? How long did these tiny planets take to become big planets?

OTTO

Young lady, that's a very good question. There's a mind hovering in that busy brain of yours. You might want to use it. What you asked? That was my downfall.

MIRANDA

I don't get it.

OTTO

The theory fell into great favor. It was endlessly discussed as all great theories are! Until – it was proven that the formation of the planets would have taken so long – they would have had to be formed before the universe. Which is not possible.

MIRANDA

How off were you? Like a million years!

(OTTO clearly enjoys being off billions of years in his theory. He booms like a trombone.)

OTTO

More! Billions! For my theory to be correct, our galaxy would have needed to have been created billions of years earlier than is believed.

MIRANDA

I want my own theory. A theory that will let me see my father again.

OTTO

I hope you have as good a time with your theory as I had with mine!

MIRANDA

And it makes you happy – that you were wrong? By like – a lot?

OTTO

*I love this theorizing!* I began again! I looked at it from another angle. I looked for evidence that the process of becoming a planet was not – at a turtle's pace.

MIRANDA

So ... you worked on it even though you were wrong?

OTTO

I worked on it because I knew it was wrong! Which is the richness of the speculation! Failure is exciting.

MIRANDA

Failure is the end.

OTTO

No! It's another chance to succeed! I looked at the theory from new angles. Where did I go wrong? It returned to favor and then would get discarded again. Time is funny. What is true is later false. What is fancy becomes reality.

MIRANDA

Gotcha! Notice how you – “Mr. Evidence Seeker” – speaks of the fancy!

OTTO

Perhaps there is room for both. But don't get too caught up in the fancy – find the truth – that will give you the answers. But still, I had a rewarding life. Even if I never make it off this iceberg – my life has been good.

MIRANDA

Perhaps you were partly right. Maybe the planet did start out as frozen. It's melting now – your ice, the poles – they're melting.

OTTO

As is the ice with my stranded passengers. Look over there!

(MIRANDA moves over to look. OTTO pulls her away.)

Careful! The ice is sinking! You can't just walk blithely around without looking! Spring is coming and the ice won't hold us much longer. I am responsible for over one hundred lives. Now, I must check on the progress of the airstrip. It's our only hope.

MIRANDA

You're building an airstrip!

OTTO

Of course. How else will we be rescued?

MIRANDA

Won't a boat come by? Like with the Titanic?

OTTO

No boat will dare to go through the ice fields for months to come. Certainly not after knowing my ship sank! If we are to be rescued – it will have to be by air.

MIRANDA

How can you build an airstrip on ice?

OTTO

We have spades, two shovels and a crowbar. It is possible.

MIRANDA

Yes, but is it probable?

OTTO

Of course it's probable. Or I would have walked everyone to Siberia by now. The ice is shifting. I must work on the airstrip. It's time for you to get off the ice before you sink.

(OTTO exits.)

MIRANDA

Daddy? Can I see you? With your heart beating? Please! Let me see you!

(Lights fade to black.)

## SCENE 5

(It is evening in the apartment.)

ELSIE

Miranda? MIRANDA - ARE YOU HOME?

(MIRANDA enters with table settings.)

MIRANDA

It's a small apartment – you don't have to shout.

ELSIE

What's all this?

MIRANDA

I - made dinner. I thought I should do something ... to earn my keep. It's no biggie. I found this really great fish shop – just two blocks away.

ELSIE

I'm not sure I'm wild about you roaming the streets alone.

MIRANDA

Just two blocks! Did you know about that store? It has *everything* - well almost everything – couldn't find Walleye – guess that's a Minnesota thing. But I found the freshest whitefish. I love the little swimmers - so I felt inspired and bought some. It's ready. And it's not take-out. I think you'll like it. Don't worry – we're just going to eat. We don't have to talk or anything.

ELSIE

(ELSIE puts away her food.)

Anything I can do?

MIRANDA

Just - eat.

(ELSIE does so as MIRANDA brings a bowl of pasta with fish to the table.)

It's super-easy – I haven't had it in – well – two years. I used to cook it over a campfire! It's just fish in a packet with onions and garlic and you cook it and throw it in with curly pasta and lots of fiery red pepper flakes. It's called -

ELSIE

Twisted Fish.

MIRANDA

He made it for you.

ELSIE

After his first fishing expedition in Alaska.

MIRANDA

We ... made it every spring for the fishing opener. And whenever we camped ... and whenever I nagged...

ELSIE

You camped? Outside?

MIRANDA

Yeah! I love sleeping under the stars. My mother hated it so it became a thing I did - with my dad. We could sit for hours in the quiet – just gazing at stars.

(MIRANDA twists some noodles on to her fork and lifts it up and just looks at it.)

MIRANDA (cont'd)

I used to call it “twisty-fishy.” “More twisty-fishy, please...” (Beat.) It’s ... just like it always was ... it’s -

ELSIE

Perfect.

MIRANDA

It is, isn’t it? (Beat.) Who’s Arnie?

ELSIE

What?

MIRANDA

Not what – who. Who’s Arnie?

ELSIE

Nobody.

MIRANDA

He left a message. He’s somebody. Somebody with a new cell phone.

ELSIE

You don’t need to concern yourself with Arnie.

MIRANDA

Just curious. I mean – even people your age have boyfriends.

ELSIE

Not a boyfriend. Just a friend – Helga’s friend actually - from our olden days. She used to call him her “gentleman friend.” When Helga died, Arnie made it his business to stay in my life. He’s very kind.

MIRANDA

Grandma had a boyfriend!

ELSIE

Some people need to have a man in their life. And he’s a very good man.

(A beat.)

MIRANDA

Your knives need sharpening.

ELSIE

I suppose. Helga was the only one who used them.

MIRANDA

I bought you a fillet knife. You didn't have one.

ELSIE

You filleted this?

MIRANDA

Well yeah! I can do some things! It's super- easy! I can teach you! Then you can have fresh fish instead of take-out.

ELSIE

I don't think I can do that. Knives scare me.

MIRANDA

Nothing to it. You just need to be smarter than knife.

ELSIE

I'm too old to learn new tricks.

MIRANDA

I'll teach you just like Dad taught me – with a sponge!

(MIRANDA jumps up and gets a sponge.)

ELSIE

I can't do the gross stuff.

MIRANDA

Get real, Aunt Elsie. You're filleting a sponge.

(MIRANDA brings over her fillet knife with the sponge.)

Okay – so the head is on the right and tail is on the left. And you'll buy it gutted so you don't have to deal with the disgusting stuff. Put your hand on mine. Let me be your guide. With the fish, you'd feel where the bones are and then just above it, slowly and deliberately, just cut across....

(And they fillet the sponge. The closeness is a bit uncomfortable and a bit sweet.)

ELSIE

I did it!

MIRANDA

Cool, isn't it? It's actually easier to fillet the fish.

ELSIE

I'll make a note of that.

MIRANDA

Do you think it will ever be possible to travel faster than the speed of light?

ELSIE

How did we go from filleting a sponge to the speed of light?

MIRANDA

Just thinking.

ELSIE

I think your thought patterns go faster than the speed of light!

MIRANDA

But seriously – could we? Could I – ever – someday – maybe?

ELSIE

From all that I've read, it doesn't seem possible.

MIRANDA

But we broke the sound barrier, right? Eons ago. So, why not go faster than the speed of light?

ELSIE

Apparently our Cosmos has a speed limit of 186,000 miles per second.

MIRANDA

Aunt Elsie! You know stuff!

ELSIE

I've picked up a few things along the way. What got you thinking about this?

MIRANDA

Just thinking about the future and the past and how muddled it is. And the stars and stuff. And my Dad. When I was cooking, I could almost feel Dad's grin over my shoulder – you know that twisted grin he would get – kind of like the curly pasta?

ELSIE

It was a bit crooked, wasn't it?

MIRANDA

This is the first time in two years that I've allowed myself to see him - funny what a piece of fish can do.



ELSIE

It's actually quite wonderful. The meal. The memory. Hard wonderful.

MIRANDA

You know what's even more wonderful? When you have it outside under the stars. The outside adds flavor, you know? Maybe some stardust gets mixed in. That's what we need. Stardust. We come from the stars you know.

ELSIE

So I heard.

MIRANDA

So, it only makes sense that we should reconnect with them from time to time.

"Hey, Stardust! How's it going? Remember me? Do you see yourself in me?"  
Let's go out and collect stardust! You could use some stardust, Aunt Elsie. You don't get out enough.

ELSIE

I go to work everyday.

MIRANDA

The outside isn't just a place for getting places! It's - a way of belonging - somewhere.

ELSIE

It's a sweet idea, Miranda. But I like my routine. My bubble bath, my book, my early nights.

MIRANDA

Just till the first star comes out? If I'm nice and say "please?" Pretty, pretty please?

ELSIE

Maybe for a little bit.

MIRANDA

I'll find a bag for the stardust -

ELSIE

Oh my, you're serious.

MIRANDA

We're going to do this!

ELSIE

I'll just clean up a bit.

MIRANDA

I'll throw these in the sink and clean up when we get home.

ELSIE

Let me get my purse.

(ELSIE goes into her bedroom as MIRANDA puts the dishes away. MIRANDA grabs a bag – maybe one of ELSIE’S lunch bags that she stashes everywhere and goes to the door.)

ELSIE (cont’d)

How about an ice cream cone? There’s a gelato place down the block.

MIRANDA

Sign me up for a pistachio and chocolate cone!

ELSIE

Coming up!

MIRANDA

And then we can take our ice cream into the park.

ELSIE

The park?

MIRANDA

That’s the only place we can see the stars! Away from the city lights.

ELSIE

No. Not the park. It’s not safe.

MIRANDA

Sure it is – it’s crammed with people walking dogs ... biking ...

ELSIE

Not the park.

MIRANDA

It’s the only place we can gather the stardust –

ELSIE

I didn’t think you really meant to do that –

MIRANDA

I do!

ELSIE

No. We can’t do the park.

MIRANDA

I don't get it – one minute you're good with everything and then – you turn off.

ELSIE

It's – just not safe. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened.

MIRANDA

*It's not even dark out yet!*

ELSIE

Not the park.

MIRANDA

What's with you? Why can't we just go out and have an ice cream in the park like everyone else?

ELSIE

I have a rule about the park. I don't go there. Ever.

MIRANDA

Where *do* you go? You're like some demented hamster on a treadmill! Get on, go to work, come home! Do not pass Go! All I want is a bit of stardust! Can't you give me that?

ELSIE

Not when it comes to the park. I'm sorry Miranda – I can't –

(MIRANDA exits to her room slamming the door.  
ELSIE breathes into a bag and then removes the dishes  
from the table. She goes to her photos. OTTO appears.)

OTTO

You're breaking through, Elsie. She's Stevie's daughter. Part of him is inside her. Don't give up.

(ELSIE exits. The lights change to the arctic. MIRANDA  
enters.)

MIRANDA

Nothing's going right! I need to know more. About seeing the past.

OTTO

If something is important to you, then – learn! Delve into your theory. Delve into mine!

MIRANDA

You don't want to be forgotten.

OTTO

Is that so terrible?

MIRANDA

But – you have a minor planet named after you!

OTTO

And an island!

MIRANDA

I understand where you're coming from. I'm afraid of the same thing.

OTTO

Of being forgotten?

MIRANDA

Of forgetting. That's why I want to get a mirror on a star, look back in time – see my father. Before my memory of him gets hazy.

OTTO

That could take a lifetime.

MIRANDA

I am starting to realize that it will take longer than a week. And I have been reading. I'm trying to understand. But all I find is endless stuff about fusion and hydrogen and helium. *That's not what I want to find out!* The stars! They keep secrets! They won't give me anything!

OTTO

The stars have no thought or care about us.

MIRANDA

I *need* to learn how to see what they see.

OTTO

I look at the stars and I want to know their origin. You look at the stars and yearn for the fanciful.

MIRANDA

“What is fancy becomes reality.” Didn't you tell me that?

OTTO

You do listen! The fanciful can ignite a spark to encourage the science. But it won't sustain you. It's the science that keeps us alive on the ice.

MIRANDA

Wouldn't you love a chance to go back? A chance to fix stuff?

OTTO

We can't go back. Humans have always looked forward.

MIRANDA

I like it here. The quiet. I feel – like nothing can hurt me – nothing can touch me.

OTTO

But it is here – where you can be touched.

MIRANDA

Wouldn't it be cool to be here forever – if we had warmth and food and all that survival stuff – just to be here and feel the approval of the stars?

OTTO

Your flight of fancy is showing itself again.

MIRANDA

I feel connected here. I imagine a molecule or two in my body is saying, "Remember when we were up there? Remember when we were in the stars."

OTTO

Such a story!

MIRANDA

But there's truth there, isn't there? There's something in me that came from them.

OTTO

Yes. In a long, roundabout way.

MIRANDA

It's too bad we don't return to them. That would give me a happily-ever-after.

OTTO

You could look at the amazement of the universe as a happily ever after.

MIRANDA

I want a forever connection – a circle. Not a line with a beginning, middle and end – I hate endings - give me a circle.

OTTO

All tied up with a nice pretty bow.

MIRANDA

I wouldn't turn it down. I do feel safe here. For the first time in two years.

OTTO

It's a precarious safety. I am doing all I can to have us rescued. And when I leave, you leave. Immerse yourself in the sky while you can.

MIRANDA

Look!

OTTO

The aurora borealis.

MIRANDA

Look at the colors and shapes. My father used to say they were unborn children playing in the heavens. Can you see them? Little souls chasing each other in a game of tag.

OTTO

They are merely energy particles from the sun colliding with the Earth's magnetic field.

MIRANDA

I like my explanation better.

OTTO

It is sweet. What happens in your story? To those little souls playing tag?

MIRANDA

They are born, I guess.

OTTO

Do they remember playing in the sky?

MIRANDA

Probably not. Too bad. That would be a nice memory to have. Once you're born – the memories are hard.

OTTO

Your tale is filled with wonder . But the reality is more astonishing.

(He acts this out.)

Light particles blown into the atmosphere! Look out over the ocean!

(MIRANDA does so.)

Now imagine the atmosphere – as this ocean – an ocean of air covering the earth. And as the light particles hit this ocean of air – the energy of the impact causes the gasses to glow – bringing us ribbons of color: violet! Blue! Red! And green! Science creating watercolors.

MIRANDA

A three-D painting!

OTTO

Created by the natural world.

MIRANDA

Look at what the sky can do! We don't know everything. I want a mirror up there. I want to see the earth – as it was two years ago – I want one more glimpse of my father.

OTTO

You are a lot like me, aren't you? All ego and "I want." Suppose you do get the mirror up there – then what? Are you sure of what you will see?

MIRANDA

I know what I want to see.

OTTO

That may not be the same thing.

MIRANDA

You're twisting everything! You hold out this life preserver and when I go to grab it – you snatch it away!

OTTO

I'm giving you a life-line but you insist on grabbing at straws!

MIRANDA

I'm trying to take what you know and move forward.

OTTO

Do it, Miranda! Take everything I know and use it! Expand on it! Introduce it into your own time! You search for answers. I search for answers. Sometimes the answer you receive is not what you are searching for! Then what?

MIRANDA

You don't know everything! You think that a mirror in space would only show a reflection from earth *after* the mirror had been in place. But that's not necessarily true! It's only true if you believe it will never be possible to travel faster than the speed of light. But - if a telescope could see a mirror that is one hundred light years away and it was placed by someone who *did* travel faster than the speed of light – one could see into the past. It could happen. Someday.

OTTO

So all we need to figure out is how to move faster than the speed of light - many times over - without burning up. Is that correct?

MIRANDA

Yes. That's all.

OTTO

Well – if that's all –

MIRANDA

Don't! Maybe there will come a time when we are beamed places – like Star Trek. Maybe we'll find a way of moving through the universe that doesn't require being propelled through space - I don't know – that's not my part of the theory. My part is that when we get a mirror up there – we will see the past!

(MIRANDA moves away.)

OTTO

Miranda!

MIRANDA

Just because your theory didn't work doesn't mean mine never will!

OTTO

Stop!

MIRANDA

*I'll do what I want! Just like you!*

OTTO

*You're going too far! That ice! It's sinking! Don't get stuck there!*

MIRANDA

*I'm fine! I -*

(MIRANDA looks around and realizes OTTO is right.)

OTTO

Jump! **JUMP!**

MIRANDA

**OTTO!**

OTTO

**JUMP!**

(And she does. The lights change back to the apartment. MIRANDA looks around and gingerly takes a step. All is fine. She goes to her purse and takes out cut-out stars and



hangs them.– everywhere. She hangs a pocket mirror on a star and not having any more mirrors, she hangs a spoon or two that gives off a reflection. The lights change to a sparkling, shimmering sky as if a thousand eyes are looking at Miranda. She kneels under the stars.)

MIRANDA

All right stars, give me your eyes and show me what you see. Show me my father. Make it possible. Please.

(The lights fade to black. Music could continue and then change as we segue into the next day.)

## SCENE 6

(It is the following evening at the apartment. ELSIE enters from work with her bag of take-out. MIRANDA is still under the stars.)

ELSIE

Miranda – are you all right?

MIRANDA

Yes.

ELSIE

Have a good day?

MIRANDA

I made a visual! What do you think?

ELSIE

You returned to your art!

MIRANDA

It's – the cosmos! Sort of. I'm looking for a stardust connection.

ELSIE

For?

MIRANDA

The past.

ELSIE

It's – simulated.

MIRANDA

Don't I know it! Paper stardust. How low I have fallen!

ELSIE

I brought home some dinner. It's not "twisty-fishy" but it's nourishment. Are you hungry?

MIRANDA

Haven't thought about it.

ELSIE

Have you eaten at all today?

MIRANDA

No. Well – some of your junk food.

ELSIE

Come on, then. We don't have to talk or anything. Just eat.

MIRANDA

Under the stars?

ELSIE

Under the stars.

(They set up dinner under the stars. For a moment – they just eat quietly. There is no rancor.)

MIRANDA

I have been reading a lot. About mirrors on stars. About satellites. I'm beginning to realize you can't really hang a mirror on a star. I'd like to – I love the idea of having a mirror reflect the past. Wouldn't that be wonderful? Imagine what we could see?

ELSIE

That's an idea that would alter the universe.

MIRANDA

I know! But the more I read, the more unlikely it seems. For now. So I thought about satellites. How we have all these satellites travelling the skies – and then I wondered if we could hang mirrors on satellites to travel around the stars – if we could do that - could they give us a glimpse of the past? I mean – we landed on a comet! Who knows what we will be able to do!

ELSIE

It does make the future sound very exciting.

MIRANDA

Do you feel connected through stardust? Does that soothe you?

ELSIE

Wherever did you get that idea?

MIRANDA

Don't know. Maybe my Dad mentioned it.

ELSIE

It's – from long-ago. I had read something where Zeus was cared for by two constellations – Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. I used to tell your father that he was Zeus – how's that for propping up a male ego? And your grandmother was Ursa Major and I was Ursa Minor – and no matter what happened to any of us – we would always be bound together by stardust. Because we once were in the heavens together.

MIRANDA

Does that comfort you?

ELSIE

Sometimes.

MIRANDA

It hurts.

ELSIE

Yes.

MIRANDA

I want him back. I imagine a world where giant mirrors float in space. They're all at different angles and distances and when you're really hurting, you can dial up these images from the past and look at other times –

ELSIE

Won't that make you hurt more?

MIRANDA

No – because I doubt myself - my memory. Those walks in the woods – his stories. Every moment of every day, those memories move further away. But if there was a universe-memory-bank – of every memory, from every speck of stardust - I could look it up.

ELSIE

Sounds like science fiction.

MIRANDA

For now. Physics is starting to look like a bunch of sci-fi theories that people dreamed up and then set out to prove. Maybe you do need to dream the dream first. I mean the theory that everything went wacko over thirteen billion years ago and just expanded at a huge rate is pretty accepted now. But someone dreamed it first. And then worked their whole lives to prove it. That could be me – dreaming of a universal stardust-memory-bank and working my whole life to make it come true!

ELSIE

It's not a bad way to spend one's life.

MIRANDA

It could wind up being one of those discarded theories. I could work my whole life on something that never works. It seems people do that.

ELSIE

Which means you have to love the process.

MIRANDA

Even if the process comes to nothing?

ELSIE

I think – it must always come to “something.” Even wrong answers lead to correct ones.

MIRANDA

You sound like a scientist.

ELSIE

Maybe I picked up some of the jargon by osmosis after working all these years in a museum.

MIRANDA

Maybe. Or maybe – there's a scientist hidden away inside of you trying to come out.

ELSIE

That's what I think about you! I believe there's this budding scientist inside of you that comes out now and then and you stop it – you tell her “Leave me alone! Not now!” Go away!”

MIRANDA

Is that what I sound like?

ELSIE

Sometimes.

MIRANDA

Guess I've been riding the negativity highway for so long, I don't notice.

ELSIE

I hope you let that “science voice” out one of these days. Helga did – it didn’t work out but she had the science gene.

MIRANDA

Grandma Helga as a scientist? Does not compute.

ELSIE

Your grandmother scored a near-perfect on the grad school entrance exam. She applied but ultimately was rejected because she was a woman.

MIRANDA

Seriously?

ELSIE

“You have the gift, Helga Schmidt. But you are very pretty. You will ultimately get married and have children and any education we provide for you will be squandered.” Helga fumed for at least a decade when she told that story.

MIRANDA

That’s – too horrible.

ELSIE

I know! But times change and if you have Helga’s gene – it would be a shame to squander it.

MIRANDA

I – don’t know if I want the science or just a path back to my father. A true path – you know? Not a crystal ball-fortune-cookie-path but one that’s for real. I’ve been investigating. I saw something today on your museum’s website – it looked really cool – a talk about the cosmos and the “hidden reality.” But it’s sold out and I wondered ...

ELSIE

If I had connections?

MIRANDA

Do you? *Do you? I’d be eternally and cosmically grateful!*

ELSIE

I think I could pull a few strings. It could help give you a true perspective on the nature of the universe.

MIRANDA

Do you think there are others who look for a cosmic memory-bank? I can’t be the only person who wants to go back and see people they’ve – lost.

ELSIE

No. You're not. I think that dream is embedded in our DNA.

(Pause.)

ELSIE (cont'd)

Miranda – would you mind cleaning up? I'm – exhausted.

(ELSIE gets up and touches her photos, reaches for a paper bag and retreats into her room. MIRANDA watches. She put away the food and goes into the living room and holds a photo of her father up to her mirrors.)

MIRANDA

I'm trying to find a way back to you, Daddy. You know that, don't you? I'm sorry. So sorry.

(OTTO appears in the background. MIRANDA sees OTTO in the mirror.)

Not you, Otto! I don't need you. I need my father.

(Lights fade to black.)

## SCENE 7

AT RISE it is the following evening. MIRANDA is awash in reams of paper and bubbles. She thumbs through the papers and with great delight lets some float to the floor. She then starts to blow her bubbles. She has latched on to a new visual. She tries to make the bubbles collide without breaking them. MIRANDA is a scientist at work with a child's toy.

ELSIE enters from the front door without her bag of take-out.

ELSIE

Oh my! I seem to be in the Fun House! It looks like the talk was – inspirational.

MIRANDA

You're home! Don't you just love this? Papers touching but with no awareness that the other paper is there. Bubbles colliding! Coming close – moving away!

ELSIE

I had no idea that teens still liked to blow bubbles.

(MIRANDA twirls around ELSIE leaving bubbles in her wake.)

MIRANDA

I'm creating multiverses! I'm trying to make the bubbles collide. They don't always cooperate. Bubble universes! I love that idea! These universes might even bump into each other from time to time – but if it's a little bump – we wouldn't feel it. There's an infinite amount of possibilities.

ELSIE

I'd say the talk at the Planetarium went well!

MIRANDA

*It did!* They said that some scientists think that when the big bang happened – there could have been gazillions of big bangs all inflating at different rates. Maybe some have stopped inflating like us and planets formed – just like us – there could be another earth out there! Exactly like us! Not that I'm an expert. Only found out about it today.

ELSIE

So you're testing the theory with bubbles?

MIRANDA

Nah – just like the visual. But the thing is – it's a totally nutso theory. And it's not one of Miranda's crazy theories – it's a "scientist's" theory. If you ask me, it kind of makes my Stardust-Memory Bank not so farfetched. But the really cool thing is – *we don't know anything!* There could be bubble universes! There could be parallel universes on top of each other – like with these papers

(And she'll thumb threw the papers.)

– and *we don't have any idea that the others exist!* Look – this paper here is right on top of this paper and neither of them know they're there! How cool is that? There could be other Elsie's out there – other Miranda's – other ... Steven's – making different choices – leading different lives! This is all just awesome!

ELSIE

Some of this sounds suspiciously like pseudo-science!

MIRANDA

Not "pseudo science" – "possible science." We don't know the truth of it – yet. Remember - the earth used to be flat, the sun revolved around the earth – all that stuff was believed. A round earth! *Whoa! Pretty "far fetched" to some people!* I don't know what's true. And neither do you. But oh man – learning about all these possibilities is totally rad!

ELSIE

I'm glad it excites you.

MIRANDA

What do you think? Here are two pieces of paper. This paper is us – today. And on this paper – maybe it’s me and Dad visiting you. And Mom, of course. Maybe we’re all on some New York City vacation together. It’s possible! IT’S POSSIBLE! I wonder what I’m like on this piece of paper. Maybe Grandma’s still with us. Maybe – she’s a scientist! Or - maybe – we’re all getting ready to go to the North Pole! There’s so many possibilities and the truth is – we just don’t know! *We don’t know anything!*

ELSIE

And you like that?

MIRANDA

*I love that!*

(MIRANDA twirls blowing bubbles, throwing papers and finally stops. Dead serious.)

MIRANDA (cont’d)

I need to ask you something.

ELSIE

Of course. We could have a great, long chat over dinner. There’s a new sushi place down the block. Shall we go out? Would you like that?

MIRANDA

Sounds great. But first – may I ask you a favor?

ELSIE

Yes.

MIRANDA

I need to stay here. Just for two more weeks – to hear the rest of the talks about the multiverses at the Planetarium. There are so many things I need to understand. I’ve gone about everything sort of – backwards. Making up theories without understanding anything - without knowing any other theories. But I can make a start here. I’ll – even call my mother and make nice and ask her – if you think it is okay.

ELSIE

My dear, I wish that were possible.

MIRANDA

I can help you. Get things in order here – cook for you! I can be nice. I used to be. Just for two weeks. It will help me. Figure out everything.

ELSIE

What “everything?”



MIRANDA

Multiverses. Stardust. Memory Banks.

ELSIE

There are – things – you don't know –

MIRANDA

*I know!* That's why I want to stay! I can learn!

ELSIE

About me! There are things you don't know about me!

MIRANDA

I know I haven't been a pleasure to be around -

ELSIE

It has nothing to do with you -

MIRANDA

You don't have to love me or anything. I think I can learn things here – things that can help me. Please – *I need this!*

ELSIE

You need to go forward.

MIRANDA

*I'm trying!*

ELSIE

Suppose what you think you need is not true.

MIRANDA

I need to find out if somewhere in my future there's hope. That I didn't kill my father.

ELSIE

Oh no sweetie, you didn't –

MIRANDA

*He died 'cause of me –*

ELSIE

Miranda – it was the truck –

MIRANDA

*It was me!*

ELSIE

No – I know what happened –

MIRANDA

You don't! You don't know about the choice I made that morning. You don't know about Robert. His stories. I've kept it inside me – but *I know* -

ELSIE

What do you know?

MIRANDA

Dad was supposed to drive me to school! I said “no.” I was going to walk with Robert. If he drove me – he wouldn't be dead!

ELSIE

Miranda – listen!

MIRANDA

I'm done listening! I need to do!

(She goes into the living room and grabs a star.)

I need to find my own way! Who's left? My mother – should I be like my mother?

(She grabs another star.)

Terrified of being alone after my father died?

(She throws it or smashes it.)

Always filling space with idle chit-chat? Or you? Should I model myself after you?

(She grabs another star.)

Hiding in a shrine to my father, to Otto, to Grandma –

(And she grabs another star and another.)

I need to figure out stuff!

(She grabs the mirror.)

Somewhere out there is another point in time – somewhere – *he could be there! And if he's there – I could discover a way to see him one more time ... one last time...*

Miranda – stop -

ELSIE

*NO!*

(She recklessly throws the stars and mirror perhaps even at ELSIE. SHE stops and picks one up.)

*I'm going to find my father!*

MIRANDA (cont'd)

(MIRANDA bolts out the door still holding one star. ELSIE starts to follow and then stops short. She tries to catch her breath and cannot. She rushes into the kitchen and grabs a paper bag and blows into it. And then takes her keys. She rushes into the living room touching her photos and goes to the door. And is stopped. )

(OTTO appears in the background.)

Breathe, Elsie.

OTTO

(ELSIE breathes into the bag.)

Bring her home.

OTTO (cont'd)

(Elsie exits.)

(We see MIRANDA running. The lights flash and turn to a starry night and a mirror hangs high in the sky – reflecting light below. MIRANDA stops - mesmerized by the mirror.)

Daddy? Are you there? *Daddy!*

MIRANDA

(MIRANDA. The lights change to the arctic. MIRANDA stops short. OTTO is there.)

MIRANDA

I'm staying here. I tried to move forward. It didn't work! There's nothing for me back home. Just this black hole that I've been living in for two years. I'm staying here - on the ice! Forever!

OTTO

You will leave. You saw how dangerous the ice is.

MIRANDA

*I have nowhere to go! No one wants me!*

OTTO

Planes are flying overhead to rescue us. One plane landed today. Another plane will come and another and another until no one is left on the ice. Not you. Not me. You must go home.

MIRANDA

I can't! Home is where I always remember that my father died because of me.

OTTO

You don't know that.

MIRANDA

*But I do! It's you who don't know!* You talk a lot but you sure don't listen.

OTTO

Point taken.

MIRANDA

There was this boy – Robert. He tells stories – like my Dad did. I used to feel so alive in my father's stories. Dad would tell me about the past – what it was like when the earth was young. I wanted to crawl into those stories and live there. Maybe I always wanted the past. Never today. Never the future.

OTTO

Miranda –

MIRANDA

*Listen!* And one day, I stopped listening to my Dad because I knew his stories. And Robert's stories were new. We decided to walk to school together. I told my dad – don't drive me. Just go to work. I was fine walking. And I was. But he wasn't. A truck ran through a red light. "Didn't see the light change..." That's what the driver said. That night the sun set at its usual time. The stars came out. My world was shattered. But the universe didn't even blink. Didn't care that I would never see my father again.

(Pause.)

MIRANDA (cont'd)

And. I. Never. Will. These last few days I thought – but I was wrong.

OTTO

I'm sorry.

MIRANDA

But I feel him. Here. It's the only place. Here. I want to stay here.

OTTO

You'll sink here.

MIRANDA

I'm sinking there! Take me with you! Take me on your plane. Let me go home with you. Please. Maybe I'll still be alive when my father is born – maybe I will be able to see him – tell him how sorry I am -

OTTO

Miranda – you know that cannot happen -

MIRANDA

But it can!

OTTO

You know I need to leave you -

MIRANDA

You'd let me go? Before I understand your theory? Before I can put you back in the spotlight?

OTTO

If it's a worthy theory, it will return. If not, I will be content to have a minor planet named after me. I do keep a glimmer of hope that you will return to your theories. Who knows what you will bring to light?

MIRANDA

Is it so easy to let go? To just leave – me?

OTTO

It's hard. Harder than I thought it would be. But there are people waiting for you.

MIRANDA

A “recently-remarried” mother.

OTTO

And a stepfather. And a great- aunt. They're not leaving you. When your father died, your world exploded. But you didn't sink into a black hole. You went on collecting new pieces of your father – yes – your father ... your aunt – even pieces of me. You're becoming a new star, Miranda. Your own blazing star. With your own blazing, flawed theories.

MIRANDA

What if everything I think – is wrong?

OTTO

What if they're all wrong but you find something else?

MIRANDA

I wasn't looking for anything else. Just my father. He's somewhere – in some mixed-up stardust – somewhere. He's definitely in the past - I could find him if I went back with you –

OTTO

The stars say that cannot happen.

MIRANDA

Are you throwing some fanciful back at me?

OTTO

Yes.

MIRANDA

Do you think there are other universes? Do you think he's perched somewhere in a different multi-verse? Or is that fanciful?

OTTO

What do you think?

MIRANDA

I don't know.

OTTO

And that's where you begin. You don't know and you need to find out. You'll never find out if you go back with me.

MIRANDA

What if it's all science fiction?

OTTO

What if it's real?

MIRANDA

I don't know the difference!

OTTO

That's the best beginning statement you could have said.

MIRANDA

My father gave me all these stories about the stars. And now, you've given me some of the science. Where do I start? With the stories or the science?

OTTO

With both. The stories fuel your imagination to propose theories. But of course, you will need the science for your actual theory.

MIRANDA

It will take years to understand/

OTTO

/they fly by very quickly if you let the science capture you.

MIRANDA

I think my father would be pleased if I went down that path.

OTTO

It's more important to know if it will please you.

MIRANDA

I won't know until I've started.

OTTO

I think you just did.

(A plane is heard. OTTO clasps MIRANDA'S hands in his.)

OTTO (cont'd)

They're coming for me. It's time. Good-bye, Little Ribackka. Swim home, little fish.

(OTTO kisses Miranda on the forehead. OTTO exits without looking back. MIRANDA watches him leave.)

MIRANDA

(Just a whisper – to OTTO'S back before he is gone.)

Back at you, Ryba. Big fish.

(MIRANDA looks at the stars for a long moment. She sees something in the distance and peers to see who it can be.)

Who's there? Otto? Elsie? *Elsie!*

(MIRANDA runs off. The lights fade to black.)

### SCENE 8

AT RISE we are in the apartment. MIRANDA and ELSIE enter. MIRANDA helps ELSIE to a chair. ELSIE is breathing rapidly – hard – in the midst of a full-blown anxiety attack.)

MIRANDA

Water?

(ELSIE shakes her head “no” and tries to breathe.)

MIRANDA (cont’d)

Junk food? Organic take-out? Should I call 911? Is your heart okay?

ELSIE

Wh-whiskey. Under sink. Wh-whiskey.

MIRANDA

Really?

(MIRANDA runs and rummages – looking for the whiskey.)

MIRANDA (cont’d)

Don’t stop breathing! Found it! I’m pouring. Breathe! Almost done. Here it comes!

(MIRANDA gets a large water class and fills it to the top. She presents it to ELSIE who appears a bit wide-eyed at the full glass full of whiskey. But she takes it. And downs a good slug of it. It takes a minute but she does start to breathe normally.)

MIRANDA

You couldn’t follow me.

ELSIE

No.

MIRANDA

You – really don’t go anywhere, do you? That’s why you couldn’t come to my father’s funeral.



ELSIE

No. But I tried – for you. I did try,

MIRANDA

I know. I saw. I didn't understand. I'm – sorry.

ELSIE

I made it to 75<sup>th</sup> Street – that's the furthest I've gone downtown in five years! *75<sup>th</sup> Street!* A miracle! I thought – breathe into the bag – do one more step – breathe into the bag -

MIRANDA

You just go to work and home and back.

ELSIE

Yes. The anxiety – it's crushing.

MIRANDA

I'm sorry I called you a demented hamster.

ELSIE

What?

MIRANDA

The other night – I was – well- not so very nice. But you risked stuff – for me. Thank you.

ELSIE

Welcome.

MIRANDA

Were you – always like this?

ELSIE

It started small. And – grew. It was actually easier to let the anxiety take hold than deal with it day after day. I knew I could never again see the stars. Only simulated ones. I saw stars tonight! In my spinning head! 75<sup>th</sup> Street!

MIRANDA

You sound proud of that!

ELSIE

I am – your aunt is a funny old soul.

MIRANDA

There's got to be help for something like that -

ELSIE

That's what Arnie says. But I didn't think I needed help. Until you came.

MIRANDA

I can look up stuff for you – find help -

ELSIE

No. I think that enough research has been done for a while. I'm exhausted.

MIRANDA

More whiskey?

ELSIE

No!

MIRANDA

What can I do for you?

ELSIE

Call your mother.

(Beat.)

MIRANDA

All right.

ELSIE

Really? You will do that?

MIRANDA

For you. And maybe – just maybe – she needs me.

ELSIE

And maybe you need her.

(Beat.)

MIRANDA

Maybe.

ELSIE

I will give you some space. I'm very tired and I'm afraid I can't finish the whiskey tonight! I'm going to turn in.

MIRANDA

I'll – put it away.

(They smile at each other having come to an understanding. ELSIE stands – frozen for a moment. MIRANDA walks over to her and lightly kisses her forehead.)

ELSIE

Night night, Little Rybka.

(ELSIE goes to the photos to kiss them. Without saying a word, she takes Helga's Science Fair Medal and puts it around MIRANDA'S neck.)

MIRANDA

(A whisper.)

Back at you.

(MIRANDA moves to the living room. She gets her cell phone from her purse. She kisses a photo of her father in the same way ELSIE does. There is a sound of the same airplane sound that MIRANDA heard on the ice. She looks up and listens.)

MIRANDA

Safe travels, Ryba. Thank-you, Otto.

(She dials her phone as the plane makes one last pass and the lights fade to black.)

END OF PLAY