

And the Universe Didn't Blink

By Claudia Haas

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For my father, William Schmidt, the first scientist I was privileged to know.

Thanks to Steve Wendy: science teacher, Arctic explorer, director, playwright for takin the time to explain the sciences to a science-challenged playwright.

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**Cast: 5-11**

**Cast: For 11: 1 male, 5 female, 5 any gender – see doubling below**

**Otto Schmidt** (male; ageless; could be shown in his prime – in his 30's or 40's or beyond-your choice). 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. His theory of the origins of the universe was a passion of his. It was favored for a while then fell into disfavor and today – has been reignited – which would please him no end. 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))

**Scientists: 8 (Females are welcome to play the male scientists however prefer that the female scientists are played by females):**

**Dmitri Grave** (male or female) (ageless) Otto Schmidt's academic advisor, University of Kiev

**Anton** (male or female) (ageless) loosely based on Viktor Safronov, distinguished Soviet scientist but changed name as he is more fiction than historical

**Particle Physics Nerd** (male or female) (college age) enthusiastic physicist-wanna-be

**Annie Jump Cannon** (female) (ageless) early female astronomer

**Henrietta Swan Leavitt** (female) (ageless) early female astronomer

**Copernicus** (male or female) (ageless) devised the theory that the earth revolved around the sun and not vice versa as widely believed

**Galileo** (male or female) (ageless) the famed Italian scientist

**Urania** (female) (ageless) The Muse of Astronomy

**Cast of 5: 4 female, 1 male**

**Otto Schmidt** (male)

**Miranda** (female)

**Elsie** (female)

**Dmitri Sarnov/Physical Particles Nerd/Annie Jump Canon/Copernicus** (female)

**Anton/Henrietta Swan Leavitt/Galileo/Urania** (female)

(You may change doubling except, of course, for Otto, Miranda and Elsie)

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

**Time:** Summer, today circa 2025

**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). Use one set – all ELSIE's apartment needs is a couch, a chair and a coffee table littered with photos of Steven. Elsewhere, there is a small kitchen table with two chairs. The apartment is ELSIE's North pole so think blues and whites/silvers. One could stash snow stars somewhere along the edges for the scene where OTTO describes his great theory about the origins of the universe.

**Synopsis**

Grief comes in many forms. Is there a science for it? Can the stars bring you solace when you grieve? Otto Schmidt grieves for the loss 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 astronomer-arctic-explorer" Otto Schmidt. With Otto, Miranda explores the nature of the universe, loss and ever-lasting presence, and starts a path to ease herself back into the world.

**Running Time:** 85-90 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.

Their Family History: Can adjust somewhat to your timeframe. (Except for Otto)

Otto Schmidt: Born September 30, 1891; died September 7, 1956

Helga Schmidt: born 1950; died 2017

Elsie Schmidt: born 1960 (Helga's younger sister)

Steven Schmidt: (Helga's son; always used his mother's last name) born 1983; died 2023

Miranda Schmidt: (Steven's daughter, Elsie's grand-niece) born 2010

Fun fact: Otto is the playwright's first cousin – twice removed

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SCENE 1

MIRANDA

*(SHE can be seen or this can be recorded and heard in the dark.)*

Once there was this blazing star. It grew brighter and brighter until one day – the lights went out and it collapsed into a small white dwarf star. Her outside was scorching hot but inside she was cold – colder than an arctic night.

*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. She stares at bag of chips or sugary cereal.)*

ELSIE

What do I know about teenage girls?

*(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 answers the buzzer.)*

ELSIE (cont'd)

Miranda? I'm buzzing you in. Take the elevator to twelve. I'll be waiting.

*(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, Helga, and Otto. It is one of her routines. There is a knock on the door and she answers it. MIRANDA enters. She has one 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 totally 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 air conditioner 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 large, metal 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? Whoa! How many photos of my father do you have?

ELSIE

As many as possible. Look, these are from his fishing expedition in Alaska. They were so good that National Geographic printed a few and 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. That works.

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.)*

ELSIE (cont'd)

Or just be quiet together. Are you still making collages and writing stories about them? I remember all those cut-outs you created of the glaciers. 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 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

Maybe you could go to the museum with me tomorrow. There's a new exhibit about the dinosaurs and the Planetarium's right next door; You could explore the past life on earth and the universe – all in one day.

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.

MIRANDA

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

ELSIE

Yes ... it's been cleaned since then. 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 with that awful Russian accent/

MIRANDA

/Don't remember.

ELSIE

I see. Well, let me turn down your bed.

MIRANDA

I'll do it. Do you mind if I make a pot of coffee? I brought my own.



ELSIE  
Isn't it a bit late for that?

MIRANDA  
Not for me.

ELSIE  
I'll look for a pot.

*(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. You are first cousins after all – a few generations removed.

MIRANDA  
*(Reading an excerpt from a book or a paper.)*  
“Otto Schmidt – Editor of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, physicist, polar explorer ...”  
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.

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. He was quite handsome – but let's just say not good at the being faithful part.

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. The coffee pot is on the stove. It's old but works. I think. 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. Look – I know I know this is 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 – like everyone else. Maybe I'll skip the coffee and just go to my room.

ELSIE

Absolutely. And do call your mother to tell her you got here safe. Let me get a pitcher of water for your room.

MIRANDA

I don't need that. Funny being in Grandma's room. I'm starting to forget her. Is that normal? To forget people once they're gone?

ELSIE

I don't have an easy answer to that.

MIRANDA

Well... good night and all that.

*(MIRANDA starts to exit.)*

ELSIE

*(In a 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 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, 823-8699. Got it? 646-823-8699. 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. SHE does not see OTTO.)*

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 looks at the papers.)*

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

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

C-h-e-l-y - 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 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. And then we sailed into an ice floe. And floundered for days/

*(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.)*

OTTO (cont'd)

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

*(You may use the gaggle of scientists for the applause of the shipmates and the evacuation – director’s choice. 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 –

*(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 photos 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. There could be a minor expletive. The phone rings. ELSIE answers it.)*

ELSIE

Hello. Hi, Rose. No, you didn't wake me. Miranda? She got in late last night safe and sound. I thought she called you. Oh. Sorry. I just assumed. She's sleeping right now. Do 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 finds her purse, jingles her keys and makes 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 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 hear it's pretty remarkable – New York City in the 20's and 30's and well – I know you like peeking into New York's past – so – give me a call. On my new cell phone. You should get a cell phone, Elsie. Then I wouldn't have to leave messages on your answering machine. Bye, Elsie. Oh! 646-823-8699. 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.)*

OTTO (cont'd)

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 – 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!



I'll slip –  
MIRANDA

I'll help you -  
OTTO

My father –  
MIRANDA

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.

*(The lights change as "DMITRI GRAVE" enters with a Rubic's Cube.)*

DMITRI

Greetings from the University of Kiev where Otto Schmidt did his dissertation under my watch. I am Professor Dmitry Grave, head of the Mathematics and Physics department. In 1916, Otto published a paper on "The Abstract Theory of Groups – which was new at the time. Otto showed the world how this theory was a necessary tool in all of the mathematical disciplines. His theorem is still in use today. Remember this?

*(He shows the audience the Rubic's Cube.)*

I bet many of you have spent hours trying to solve this? Yes? No? Maybe? Think of this as your toolkit. It's fascinating. Imagine, sitting two people next to each other to solve this. Maybe the first person starts by focusing on the corners while the second person starts with the edge pieces. According to Otto, there are a nested set of sub steps needed to solve the Cube. And if you break it down, even though the people went about it differently, the two strategies come out to be essentially the same. The "Abstract Theory of Groups" tells us that even if hundreds of arrangements can be made to solve a mathematical problem, those arrangements all stem from the same toolkit. What do you think? Too much information?

## DMITRI (cont'd)

The point is – there was a mind at work. Consider: in his twenties, he was thought to be the future of mathematics in Russia. But that wasn't enough. So, he went on to lead polar expeditions. When that still wasn't enough, he was determined to figure out the origins of the universe. Heady stuff. He became known world-wide as an astronomer, a geologist, a publisher, a humanitarian and a statesman. If he didn't exist, you couldn't make him up. Who would believe you? Some scientists fumed. Why was this man given the talents of ten men?

So it is interesting to note that what you are seeing is true. Otto's ship did sink in an ice floe and for that he was awarded the title "Hero of the Soviet Union." Other explorers were enraged. Why was this man being rewarded for sinking his ship? He did lose a crew member but the fact that one hundred and eleven people survived on the ice is an accomplishment. The whole world was watching and Stalin knew that. Maybe Otto got a hero's welcome so that Stalin could put a spin on what could have been a catastrophe but wasn't. With Stalin's "hero" declaration, everyone focused on how Otto led his crew and passengers to safety. Not that his ship sank.

Truth be told, Stalin hated Otto. And the feeling was mutual. Otto was disgusted by Stalin's economic policies which created widespread famine. And Otto did not keep his mouth shut. Everyone wondered why Stalin let him live. It was not in Stalin's nature to let people who criticized him stay alive.

The gossip was ... yes, scientists gossip ... occasionally... anyway, the scuttlebutt was Stalin secretly hoped that each time Otto embarked on an arctic adventure, he wouldn't come back. But he always came roaring back. He was hard to ignore. Maybe Stalin thought he would look magnanimous in the eyes of the world by letting Otto live. But that doesn't explain why he awarded Otto the honor of the "Order of Lenin" three times, as well as other Russian honors and medals. And there was a feeding frenzy naming things after Otto – planets, islands, streets, science stations. Let's just say, if Otto disappeared, the world would take notice.

*(DMITRI exits 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.

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.

Dinner ready?  
MIRANDA

I hope so.  
ELSIE

What is it?  
MIRANDA

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

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

Noodles, ground beef, peas and French dressing.  
ELSIE

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

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.  
ELSIE

Did you even brown the meat?  
MIRANDA

Are you supposed to? Oh! *Don't eat it!* The plug is still wrapped in a knot. It was never plugged in. It might kill you! How about leftover pizza? Leftover sesame noodles?  
ELSIE

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

You know, Miranda – you could meet me halfway. I'm trying to please you and it's exhausting.  
ELSIE

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

You liked the show at the planetarium.  
ELSIE

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 as OTTO speaks. Maybe – she is connecting to the memory.)*

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. But Miranda's not gone. She's your stardust, too.

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

OTTO (cont'd)

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?

OTTO

Maybe.

MIRANDA

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

OTTO

It's possible..

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 further you will be from 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 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.)*

OTTO (cont'd)

Imagine these tiny planets just spinning. And soon they are orbiting the sun because of the sun's gravitational pull. 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.)

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 according to my theory - the formation of the planets would have taken so long – they would have had to be formed before the universe formed. Which is not possible.

MIRANDA

How off were you? Like a million years!

*(OTTO clearly enjoys being off millions 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. Still by proposing a theory, I sent many scientists on a course to disprove it. Scientists love to disprove other theories. But they needed my theory to begin with.

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.)*

OTTO (cont'd)

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.

MIRANDA

I'm staying. I need to figure out a way to see my father – with his beating heart.

OTTO

You are as stubborn as I was. I wasn't sure but I definitely see myself in you.

MIRANDA

I do not see myself in you!

*(MIRANDA exits. ANTON enters.)*

ANTON

Stubborn is maybe the kindest word for you. Your calculations were off by billions of years but you continued to stand by your theory.

OTTO

A million years,, a billion years... I knew I was getting close. And I did finally get the math to agree with me.

ANTON

But the theory didn't hold.

OTTO

No. It fell apart.

ANTON

In fact, it was I who figured out the origins of the universe. It was I who theorized that the planets formed from a disk of gas around the sun.

OTTO

Standing on my shoulders.

ANTON

Knowing you were wrong was helpful.

OTTO

But my theory of accretion spurred you on.

ANTON

I might have come to the same conclusion without your work.

OTTO

But you didn't.

ANTON

We'll never know. I do know I was awarded a prestigious prize for my work.

OTTO

And the name of that prestigious prize?

*(ANTON squirms a bit.)*

Anton? Do you recall the name of the prize.

ANTON

The Otto Schmidt USSR Academy of Sciences Prize.

*(THEY exit as the 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 sole. I love the little swimmers - so I felt inspired and bought some. It's ready. And it's not take-out. You'll like it. We're just going to eat. We don't have to talk or anything.

*(ELSIE puts her food in the kitchen.)*

ELSIE

Anything I can do?

MIRANDA

Eat!

*(MIRANDA brings a bowl of pasta with fish to the table.)*

MIRANDA (cont'd)

It's super-easy. I haven't had it in ... 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 ...

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 gazing at stars, searching for planets, watching satellites. He always promised that when I was sixteen, we would camp in the arctic. That's not going to happen.

*(MIRANDA shakes off the memory. SHE 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...." It's ... just like it always was ...

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. And you do take good care of yourself. I see all the skin serums in the bathroom. You want to look good for someone. Maybe for Arnie?

ELSIE

Skincare is very important. Cell turnover is a real thing. Everything turns over including your skin. There's science to back that up. And if you're my age and want to keep your job, one does try to look capable if not youthful. Whenever layoffs occur, I know they're checking me out. "Hmm, how old is Elsie now? Hasn't she been here forever? Shouldn't she be retiring?" I will work as long as they let me. I need to. As for Arnie, he's 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

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 gross stuff. Put your hand on mine. I'll guide you. 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? 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 every day.

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... my skin serums.

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 be with 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. I'm – afraid of 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

Why can't we just go out and have an ice cream in the park like normal people?

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.  
The lights fade as ELSIE breathes into a bag, touches her  
photos and exits.)*

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Optional Intermission  
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**Scene 6**

*(Lights up over the arctic OTTO is reading information about him by the trunk.. 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 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

But the universe is not a circle. There was a beginning and there will be an end. Just as there will be an end to all the stars above us.

MIRANDA

If there's an ending to everything – then why isn't there an ending to sadness? It's been two years and every day I miss my father more. Every day, there are things I want to tell him and every day I get this hurt back when I remember that I can't tell him anything anymore.

OTTO

Physics can explain some of that.

MIRANDA

Physics can't explain my sadness.

OTTO

Don't be so sure. It's been noted that if two particles interact with each other a lot – as you and your father did and then are separated, they remain connected. This is dependent on the meaningfulness of their connection. I suspect your connection with your father was filled with meaning. If you stimulated particle number one – it would react. It will then look for “it's friend-particle-number-two” to also respond to the stimulus. If particle number two died, particle number one would still send off energy looking for particle two.

MIRANDA

So I am sending off all this energy – to nowhere?

OTTO

Everything goes somewhere. Your energy could be converted into the grief you are feeling. Maybe you're reabsorbing your own energy.

MIRANDA

I don't know what you are talking about.

OTTO

The point is the amount of energy in the universe is constant. It cannot be destroyed. But it can be transformed. For you and your father, the energy has been transformed. But it's there.

MIRANDA

So, I send out the memory of camping with my father and what returns to me – is pain.

OTTO

For now. Maybe each time you send out a memory, what will return to you will change. Maybe it will transform to gratitude. Gratitude that you had such a father. It's not a guarantee. Just a thought.

MIRANDA

Right now I am in this world where I am afraid to forget him but remembering hurts. But for whatever reason, remembering him here – in the arctic doesn't hurt as much. I 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.

*(OTTO and MIRANDA sit together and watch the sky.  
The lights change. PARTICLE PHYSICS NERD enters.)*

PARTICLE PHYSICS NERD

Particle physics is everything and I mean everything. The stars, the planets, you, these lights, this set are all made out of particles of matter.

We love to say we are “star stuff.” And we are. And the phrase is so poetical and lyrical and well... nice. It's much more romantic than announcing we have the same make-up as a cockroach.

Which we do. Don't get your knickers in a twist – the make-up is not exactly the same but guess what? The molecules that are made up of atoms – they make up everything – you, me and that pesky, pesty cockroach. The things that is amazing is those atoms have these electrons buzzing around them and then – inside each atom are these itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny particles called protons and neutrons and inside *that* – are you still with me? Inside the protons and neutrons are these miniscule particles we call quarks. Quarks are so tiny, we don't have a clue as to how to measure them. Because – get this – quarks are maybe *ten thousand times* smaller than the nucleus of the atom. Mind blowing, right?

Particles can change. If they start to decay, they can meet up with other particles to become a new particle. If you study particle physics, you find new ways to look at scientific theory and solve scientific problems. At least that what the professor promises. I'm hoping it's true because that's what I want – a new map to look at scientific theory. A new way to question stuff. And I'll get there. As soon as I master particle physics. So far I have a “C.”

*(PARTICLE PHYSICS NERD exits. The lights change.  
Maybe – the lights dance.)*

MIRANDA

I think the sky is talking to us. 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. Maybe lighting enhances his lines.)*

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 – maybe we can change our atomic make-up someday - 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 a mirror and hangs it up. She hangs a spoon or two from the kitchen table that gives off a reflection. If there are other found objects that reflect light, she hangs them up. Candles?)*

*MIRANDA brings out some handmade stars from the trunk. ANNIE JUMP CANNON and HENRIETTA SWAN LEAVITT enter. MIRANDA can freeze or listen to their conversation and take it all in. ANNIE and HENRIETTA proceed to hang up stars all over the room as they speak.)*

HENRIETTA

What a treat to be back among the stars again. How many did we study?

ANNIE

I classified over 350,000 stars. Of course, I was hired just to provide data given to me from glass photographs of the stars -

HENRIETTA

- Oh those glass plates! It's a good thing my hearing went instead of my eyes.

ANNIE

As I was saying, I was hired to provide data to male astronomers to analyze but really – I did the analyzing. I classified them according to temperature – a classification that is still used today. From 1911 to 1915, I classified 5,000 stars every month and this child wants it all in a week.

HENRIETTA

They called you the “Census Taker of the Sky.”

ANNIE

Not good enough. I would have preferred “Annie Jump Cannon’s law of classifying stars.”

HENRIETTA

They named a crater of the moon after you.

ANNIE

“Cannon crater.” They did that for you, too. I figure out how to classify stars by temperature and your work becomes the building block for measuring the universe. And how are we honored? By naming giant holes in the moon after us. At least you got a telescope at the McDonald Observatory in Texas named after you – “The Henrietta Leavitt telescope.” Now, that’s an honor.

HENRIETTA

The irony being, we were never allowed to go near a telescope. Women couldn’t be trusted with such a complicated and delicate instrument.

ANNIE

We were supposed to stay home and look after babies. But what are babies anyway? Possibly the most complicated and delicate instrument known to humanity. Look at these stars she made. They’re all alike. She gave no thought to Novas, red stars, white dwarf stars.

HENRIETTA

Did you when you were fifteen?

ANNIE

Of course. I obsessed about their make-up, their distances. Their brightness. I was just a tiny bit jealous when Pickering assigned you to measure the brightness of stars.

HENRIETTA

It seemed simple enough, "Here, my dear Henrietta start with a sequence of 46 stars in the North Celestial Pole. When that is complete, I will give you the next step."

ANNIE

But he never really gave you the next step.

HENRIETTA

He didn't have to. I was figuring it out. I just went on to sequence pieces of the sky until finally I had information on 108 areas of the sky.

ANNIE

And did you do that in a week?

HENRIETTA

It took a lifetime. But the results were worth it. I saw patterns.

ANNIE

I remember. And those patterns became rungs on a ladder.

HENRIETTA

And these rungs helped scientists measure distances to other galaxies.

ANNIE

They should have named a law of physics after you.

HENRIETTA

Maybe. Who knows? What I do know is I wish this child could feel the exhilaration we felt when we found something of importance in our data. We found it. Not the astronomers we were hired to help.

ANNIE

What did Otto say? This theorizing? It's like having a conversation with the universe.

HENRIETTA

We had that.

ANNIE

Indeed we did.

*(And the stars are now hung up in the apartment.)*

All right stars, show your stuff.

*(As THEY exit, the lights change to a sparkling, shimmering sky as if a thousand eyes are looking at Miranda. She kneels under the stars.)*

MIRANDA

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

*(The stars dance and MIRANDA watches as the lights fade to black.)*



**SCENE 7**

*(It is the following morning at the apartment. ELSIE enters getting ready for work. MIRANDA is asleep under the stars.)*

Miranda – are you all right?

ELSIE

Yes.

MIRANDA

About last night...

ELSIE

I think we don't understand each other. I'm used to that. Let's leave it alone. What do you think? I made a visual!

MIRANDA

Paper stars! Interesting.

ELSIE

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

MIRANDA

For?

ELSIE

The past.

MIRANDA

It's – simulated.

ELSIE

Don't I know it! I made stars from paper that come from trees. How low I have fallen!

MIRANDA

Can I get you some coffee? It's on a timer and should be ready.

ELSIE

Coffee would be nice. Under the stars?

MIRANDA

Under the stars.

ELSIE

*(ELSIE gets two mugs of coffee. MIRANDA takes out some brochures. 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

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

Wouldn't that make you hurt more?

MIRANDA

I'm starting to doubt myself. Those walks in the woods – his stories. Every moment of every day, those memories move further away. You know how they say the universe is expanding and other galaxies are further away all the time? My memory is like that. Every morning, I feel my memories are further away. What's accurate? Am I remembering a true thing or what I wish to be true? 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 people made fun of those dreaming scientists. But the dreamer worked their whole life 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 actually used Otto’s flawed theory of the Origins of the Universe as a treatise on how flawed theories are necessary to find scientific truth.

MIRANDA

She knew Otto’s theory?

ELSIE

We all did. But Helga tied it together and showed us that today’s theory is based on Otto’s. The chairman of the astrophysics department was not impressed. “You do have a gift. But writing a paper on a flawed theory is not the best tool for getting into our department. Plus, you are very pretty. Graduate school would be wasted on you. You will likely get married and have children.” Helga fumed for at least a decade when she told that story.

MIRANDA

That's – horrible. I wonder if Otto knows she wrote about his theory.

ELSIE

Otto died in 1956 so it is unlikely. I do think Otto would be pleased that his theory of accretion is accepted. The planets did start out as dust as Otto thought. His proposal that the sun passed through a dense cloud and emerged covered with dust and gas that became planets may have been discounted but the planets – one might say – were initially a collection of dust.

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.)

Oh my – the time. I need to head out to work. I'll find you some tickets to the talk this afternoon. Come to my office at noon. Do you remember where it is?

MIRANDA

I remember. You showed it to me on Dinosaur Day.

*(ELSIE gets up and touches her photos, reaches for a paper bag and exits. MIRANDA watches. SHE 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. People dream up theories every day. I understand it can take years and some people even died defending their new scientific theory - I'd prefer that didn't happen to me. But it's okay if people make fun of me. I don't care. I just need to see you and tell you how sorry I am. So sorry.

*(MIRANDA exits to her room. The lights change.  
COPERNICUS and GALILEO enter.)*

COPERNICUS

My publication "On the Revolution of the Celestial Spheres" was called the "Copernican Revolution" – named after me – Nicolaus Copernicus – and my work was the start of the Scientific Revolution.

GALILEO

He modestly said.

COPERNICUS

It was 1543. Who before me proposed the theory that the earth moved around the sun and that the sun was the center of the universe? Not the earth as previously thought – that was me.

GALILEO

*Your theory? Your work?* How dependent were you on the scientists that came before you?

COPERNICUS

I came about my findings independently.

GALILEO

I could argue the point and mention all the Islamic scholars who proposed this theory before you.

COPERNICUS

As I stated, I came to my findings on my own. *And* I might add, I did not backtrack and change my mind as others did, Signore Galileo. I am looking at you.

GALILEO

Indeed you were so brave you only had a handful of your manuscripts printed because you knew it would invite scorn. And your fragile little ego would not allow that.

COPERNICUS

I did not want to publish my theory until I had looked at it from every angle and was convinced that it was correct. I did not shout out every tiny finding to the universe as you did. Galileo did this. Galileo did that. What did you do on your own?

GALILEO

I improved the telescope.

COPERNICUS

Improved. Not invented.

GALILEO

I observed and mapped the surface of the moon.

COPERNICUS

Because you had an improved telescope!

GALILEO

Exactly! I discovered Jupiter's moons.

COPERNICUS

That was a good one – I'll grant you that.

GALILEO

And I upheld your theory that the earth revolves around the sun.

COPERNICUS

Until you didn't.

GALILEO

There were circumstances. You might have done the same.

COPERNICUS

Never!

GALILEO

Says the man who drew his heavenly arrangement in 1510 and did not publish it until 1543. Did you really spend thirty-three years analyzing it?

COPERNICUS

I like to be thorough.

GALILEO

You're a lot like me. You liked staying alive.

COPERNICUS

My theory only stirred a little controversy. The Catholic church ignored it.

GALILEO

Because you published it and then conveniently died.

COPERNICUS

I assure you, it wasn't convenient for me. My views might have been lost in time if it wasn't for you. You went along with it. You said I was right. You gave it legitimacy. So I should thank you. And I would thank you if you hadn't recanted and said you weren't sure any more. I wish you hadn't told the inquisitors that you weren't sure about what orbits what and that you just like a healthy debate.

GALILEO

What would you do if the inquisitors tied you up and threatened to torture you and then burn you alive at the stake unless you assured them the earth was fixed and the sun revolved around it?

COPERNICUS

Point taken. What would people believe today if I never published my theory?

GALILEO

Science comes out. It refuses to stay hidden. Often, it shows itself before people are ready for it. Someone else would have noticed the earth's revolution.

COPERNICUS

But I noticed it first.

GALILEO

I think we already had that conversation. Have you seen the new telescopes they have these days?

COPERNICUS

Oh to start again.

GALILEO

To new beginnings!

*(COPERNICUS and GALILEO exit as they chatter away.)*



## SCENE 8

*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!

*(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 through the papers.)*

MIRANDA (cont'd)

– 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 Mirandas – other ... Stevens – 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! Let's burn them at the stake!* I don't know what's true. And neither do you. But learning about all these possibilities is totally rad!

Watch! 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 or smashes her objects.)*

MIRANDA (cont'd)

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

*(She grabs more stars.)*

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

*(Grabbing more stars.)*

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...*

ELSIE

Miranda – stop -

MIRANDA

*NO!*

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

MIRANDA (cont'd)

***I'm going to find my father!***

*(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.)*

OTTO

Breathe, Elsie.

*(ELSIE breathes into the bag.)*

OTTO (cont'd)

Bring her home.

(Elsie exits.)

*(We see MIRANDA running. The lights flash and turn to a starry night and MIRANDA stops - mesmerized.)*

MIRANDA

Daddy? Are you there? *Daddy!*

*(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 know 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 maybe – 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 were like this molecular cloud that was growing fast. So fast that finally gravity took over and you thought you were collapsing. But in reality, your mind was heating up, questioning, thinking, wishing, investigating. 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 don't know if I want the science path. Or the story path. I don't know what I want.

OTTO

Which just gives you more things to figure out.

MIRANDA

I guess I won't know anything until I've started down one of them. Or all of them.

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

OTTO

They're coming for me. It's time. Swim home, little fish. It's been a special time getting to know you. I'll miss you. 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. I’ll miss you, too.

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

MIRANDA (cont’d)

Who’s there? Elsie? Is that you? *Elsie!*

*(MIRANDA runs off. The lights change. URANIA enters. SHE carries a celestial globe and/or a compass. She is the goddess of astronomy.)*

URANIA

A typical galaxy such as your Milky Way has about a billion stars give or take a hundred. As the goddess of astrology who knows things – particularly about galaxies, there are probably anywhere from one hundred billion to two trillion galaxies in the universe. I’d love to give you an exact number but I haven’t had time to count them all. With these inexact calculations, scientists - and goddesses - estimate that there are about 200 billion-trillion stars in the universe.

Now think about what might be happening on the trillions of worlds that orbit these stars. We don’t know what might be. In fact, we barely know anything. But we know they are there.

*(URANIA exits as the lights change to the apartment.)*

**SCENE 9**

*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 glass 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 to 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.

MIRANDA

Really? That's all you want?

ELSIE

That's all.

*(Beat.)*

MIRANDA

All right.

ELSIE

Really? You will do that?

MIRANDA

For you. Who knows? Maybe she needs me.

ELSIE

And maybe you need her.

*(Beat.)*

MIRANDA

May-be.

ELSIE

I will give you some space. I'm very tired and I'm afraid I can't finish that entire glass of 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, Rybka. Thank-you, Otto.

*(She dials her phone as the plane makes one last pass and the lights fade to black Maybe one last light cue of glistening stars.)*

END OF PLAY