

And the Universe Didn't Blink
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For my father, William Schmidt, the first scientist I was privileged to know.

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

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CAST: 2 (1w, 1m)

MIRANDA SCHMIDT (female – 18) Miranda is lost in grief over her father's death; she is a bit of a porcupine and has a pressing need to see her father one more time. Can the universe cross the line between life and death? She turns to the stars for answers but when they stay mute help comes from an unlikely source.

OTTO SCHMIDT (male – an ancestor from Miranda's past – you can cast him in his 30's, 40's, 50's or beyond). He's a past vigorous Russian explorer, astronomer, mathematician. Larger than life – emotionally, intellectually and even physically, he is Miranda's ancestor – a second cousin once removed. Otto's story is taken from Russian history. As for the fanciful – that is all mine.

VOICE: Anya, Miranda's grandmother (Can be recorded)

PLACE: A park which becomes the Arctic ice.

TIME: Today

RUNNING TIME: 60-65 minutes

SYNOPSIS: Miranda dwells in the past – any past – as long as the world is prior to her father's death a few months ago. Reeling from the finality of scattering her father's ashes, Miranda comes across an ancestor from her father's past – the “astronomer-physicist-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.

The play is continuous with no scene breaks. All changes should be done with lighting.

And the Universe Didn't Blink

MIRANDA

(She can be seen alone in the dark or this can be recorded during the blackout before the lights come up.)

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 up on MIRANDA. She is in a park here she has just scattered her father's ashes. Her grandmother is likely nearby. There is a soft wind and likely the smells and sounds of the outside.)

MIRANDA

You may blow the ashes, wind. There was a vibrancy to my dad that cannot be blown away. So try to sweep him away, wind. Try as you might, I know that somewhere in this great expanse, my father's heart still resonates. And I'm going to tap into it because ... I have to. I need to. Or else I can't go on.

(The wind kicks up. It swirls. It roars. It gusts. It howls. The lights similarly move. A ship horn blares loudly. OTTO appears in the background. We are now in the arctic. If we want to get specific, we are in the ice floes in the Bering Strait about one mile from the Bering Sea.)

OTTO

Everyone! Get on the ice. Women and children first. Then the radio! Grab the supplies and get off the ship before it sinks!

(OTTO approaches Miranda.)

Don't just stand there! Grab something and abandon ship! Ernst! I told you to dismantle the radio! Without it we are lost. Next – the tents and the food. Every bag of food must make it to the ice. And the heaters. And tools.

(The ship horn sounds more mournful.)

Are the women and children on the ice? I see some heaters left. Get them. We're going down. ERNST! Contact Moscow later. Grab the radio NOW! Seaman Youstevich, you're carrying too much! Seaman Youstevich! Man overboard! Man overboard!

(A car horn now blares loudly and we hear an awful crash.)

MIRANDA

DADDY!

Get off the ship!

OTTO

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

MIRANDA

Get on the ice!

OTTO

I'll slip –

MIRANDA

- I'll help you –

OTTO

My father!

MIRANDA

You'll drown.

OTTO

I can't leave him –

MIRANDA

(OTTO holds out his hand.)

Come here.

OTTO

(MIRANDA takes his hand and looks out. Maybe we hear the sound of waves.)

You're safe.

MIRANDA

Who are you?

OTTO

A friend of your father's.

MIRANDA

Where –

OTTO

- Shh no. questions. You're where you need to be. Are you warm? Here. Wrap this around you.

(OTTO wraps a blanket or a jacket around MIRANDA.)

MIRANDA

That ship is down.

OTTO

But the supplies are here. We have all we need to survive until rescue.

MIRANDA

The park?

OTTO

It's here. Everything is here.

MIRANDA

I don't see it.

OTTO

You don't need to.

MIRANDA

I don't understand.

OTTO

Give it time.

MIRANDA

Time runs out.

OTTO

I don't suppose it would help if I told you it was February 13, 1934?

MIRANDA

You could tell me I was on the Titanic and I'd believe you. I've been living in a black hole for months – lost in time.

OTTO

Then let's say, I caught you somewhere in time. Although some say "time" is a manmade constraint.

MIRANDA

Who are you?

OTTO

Otto Schmidt, Russian arctic explorer, mathematician, physicist, hero of the Soviet Union. By all accounts, a brilliant man.

MIRANDA
And modest.

OTTO
There's no point hiding your light under a bushel.

MIRANDA
And you knew my father.

OTTO
In a roundabout way.

(Lights change.)

MIRANDA
Can you tell –

OTTO
- Not now. Look the sun is down. Watch the sky. All your answers are there.

MIRANDA
The stars. My father used to tell me all my answers would be answered by the stars.

OTTO
And so they shall.

MIRANDA
I want to be up there with them.

OTTO
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 it for hundreds of years.

MIRANDA
We are looking into the past.

OTTO
Yes.

MIRANDA

I need the past. I need the sun to shine its rays on me as I was three months ago.

OTTO

I'm afraid the only past you'll get from the sun is eight minutes.

MIRANDA

So, if I want to see the sun as it is now, I have to wait eight minutes. I can do that. I have nothing but time. I wonder if that star over there sees my father.

OTTO

It's possible.

MIRANDA

How far back do the stars go?

OTTO

How far back do you want them to go? Hundreds of years? Decades? The further away they are, the longer it takes for its light to reach us.

MIRANDA

I want some starlight to reach me from a year ago when I was out camping with my father under the stars.

OTTO

Who knows? Maybe we each have a star seeing our past. Maybe there's a star looking at my childhood farm in Belarus.

MIRANDA

Do you really think there's a star up there who sees my father? That somewhere in its light is my father?

OTTO

That's not a scientific conclusion.

MIRANDA

No. But it's a beginning. I've spent the last few months 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.

MIRANDA

I wonder.

(MIRANDA grabs a mirror from her purse.)

Hold this up.

OTTO

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

MIRANDA

Is it true what you said? 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 months ago.

OTTO

It would be easier to find 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 on earth as it was years ago?

OTTO

You could never hang a mirror on a star. It would take more than 80,000 years to reach even the nearest star and even if it were possible to get there, the mirror would burn up.

MIRANDA

It's an inflammable mirror, okay? Just suppose.

OTTO

Assuming you could hang an "inflammable" mirror on a star and assuming you could 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 – your "inflammable" mirror was in place and *if* there was a telescope powerful enough to easily view what the mirror reflected and if so many other improbably 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, the 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 into the future – the further would 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. Apologizes 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! Who has decades to work on a theory?

OTTO

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

MIRANDA

All right, Mr. Theory. I'm here now. Teach me. I've been pulled towards a black hole for months and I can only fight its pull if I can see through the starlight. I think you can help me find my father in the stars. I don't need an old theory. I need to see what they see. Can you do that?

OTTO

It's not what the stars see that is important. It's the theory. It's understanding their light ... how they came to be. If you have a theory, it will follow you wherever you are. It'll 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. It's that excitement that will keep you out of the black hole. 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 some papers from his supplies on the ice and crush it into a ball. Or, if you've managed some ice floes onstage – he creates a snowball from that. Or not. Just play. He acts this out. He loves this. He lives for this.)

OTTO (cont'd)

- Until eventually – our sun passes through a dust cloud attracting more and more pieces of matter – and then the 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 the 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 your father, your mother, a bit of Miranda! Even a touch of me.

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

It's spinning as a snowball does – as it careens down a hill – gathering more and more snow until the tiny snowball is a massive snowman and finally – a frozen planet! That frozen planet will slowly warm up and produce life!

(MIRANDA is enjoying this interlude and they finally collapse on the ice.)

MIRANDA

How long would it take – this acquiring of snow – or rather matter – to actually become planets?

OTTO

What did you say?

MIRANDA

How long did it take? One year? Twenty years? How long did it take for these tiny planets to become large ones?

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.

MIRANDA

Your modesty is showing again.

OTTO

We called it "The Theory of Accretion." How's that for a fancy term for planet building? But in the end, it was proven that according to my theory – the formation of the planets would have

OTTO (cont'd)

taken so long – that they would have had to be formed before the universe did. 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 theories. But – they needed my theory to begin with.

MIRANDA

Maybe I should devise my own theory. A theory that will let me see my father again. It's important. I need to tell him something.

OTTO

What I wish for you is that 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

Failure is a new chance to succeed. I turned my theory every which way. Where did I go wrong? That would let me start again. And indeed – it returned to favor and then was discarded again. Time is funny. What is true is later false. What is fanciful can become reality.

MIRANDA

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

OTTO

You’re right – there is room for both. But don’t get too caught up in the fanciful – find the truth – that will give you answers. Decades of work on my “Theory of Accretion” never did find its place in scientific discoveries. Although it proved a steppingstone for other seekers. Still, I cannot complain. I had a rewarding life. Even if I never make it off this iceberg, my life has been good.

MIRANDA

“Had” a rewarding life? *Who are you?*

OTTO

I told you – a friend of your father’s.

MIRANDA

I knew his friends. I don’t remember you.

OTTO

He worshipped me. For a time.

MIRANDA

Your ego is showing. Again.

OTTO

He used to go into your grandmother’s trunk and pull out newspaper clippings of me on the Chelyuskin. He pretended to be a pilot and played “ice rescue.”

(OTTO sets himself up as in an airplane. Maybe he has a scarf and ear muffs to costume himself. He then makes airplane noises.)

OTTO (As the “rescuing” pilot.)

“Here I come to save the day! (I think he got that phrase from a “Mighty Mouse” cartoon.)

Fear not, Captain Otto Schmidt, Stevie Schmidt is here to rescue you and bring you to safety.” *(Maybe more airplane noises.)*

(Smiling at the memory.)

He was adorable.

MIRANDA

I never heard my father described as adorable.

OTTO

Oh but he was when he was little. He had a rabid curiosity and would drive your grandmother mad with his questions.

MIRANDA

So you knew him as a child.

OTTO

One could say that.

MIRANDA

And we all have the same last name.

OTTO

Otto Julevich Schmidt. I had an Uncle Julevich – Julius to you. He left for greater things in America. We didn't hear much – I think he went into the trades as did my father. But I – of course – became world famous as the Hero of the Soviet Union –

MIRANDA

Hero?

OTTO

Indeed. See all those passengers on the ice? It was my thinking that saved them. I was richly rewarded with titles. Money would have been helpful but the Russians like their titles.

MIRANDA

So you sank your ship and became a hero?

OTTO

Yes ... I believe it was a PR thing for Stalin. After my plight became world famous and it was known that I kept 111 people alive on the ice and built an air strip –

MIRANDA

- Wait – you built an air strip?

OTTO

Not yet. But soon. How else can we be rescued? Spring is coming and the ice will ink.

MIRANDA

Won't a boat come buy for you? Like with the Titanic?

OTTO

No boat will dare to go through these ice floes for months. Certainly not after knowing my own ship sank. Our only hope is air rescue?

MIRANDA

How can you build an airstrip on ice?

OTTO

We have spades, shovels and a crowbar. It's possible.

MIRANDA

Yes, but is it probable?

OTTO

Of course it is probable. Or I would be walking everyone to Siberia by now. The ice is shifting though. I need to get you off of it before you sink.

MIRANDA

I'm not going anywhere. This is the first time I can feel my father since he died. I know if I stay, I could see him again. With his beating heart.

OTTO

You're as stubborn as I was at your age. I wasn't sure what I would find but I definitely see myself in you.

MIRANDA

I do not see myself in you!

OTTO

I think you do. Or you wouldn't stay.

MIRANDA

You know things I want to know. Do you think it would ever be possible to travel faster than the speed of light?

OTTO

How did we go from building an airstrip to the speed of light?

MIRANDA

Just thinking. We broke the sound barrier, right? Eons ago. So, why not go faster than the speed of light?

OTTO

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

MIRANDA

That isn't what I want to hear! I need to know more. About seeing the past.

OTTO

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

MIRANDA

Your theory of accretion won't help me see my father.

OTTO

You never know. Science has a way of finding relationships between theories. Plus – I was on to something. I just don't know where I went wrong. It still pains me.

MIRANDA

You don't want to be forgotten.

OTTO

Is that so terrible?

MIRANDA

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

OTTO

Of being forgotten?

MIRANDA

Of forgetting. Already, I am forgetting my mother – her sounds, her perfume. It's been ten years. I don't want this to happen with my father. I need to see him before my memory gets hazy. So you see, I don't have decades to wait on a theory. I just have "now."

OTTO

What you wish – could take a lifetime. There is a reality to science that you can always tap into through knowledge. You need to read. Learn about the nature of the stars. Understand fusion, hydrogen and helium-

MIRANDA

I don't want a physics course. *That's not what I'm looking for!* I want to talk to the stars! They keep secrets. They won't give me anything but teases of light.

OTTO

The stars have no thought or care about us.

MIRANDA

I need to see what they see.

OTTO

And you want what you want – right now.

MIRANDA

Yes.

OTTO

And the stars are not cooperating.

MIRANDA

Don't make fun of me.

OTTO

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

MIRANDA

That North Star knows something. It's always there. It sees something. Perhaps it sees my father.

OTTO

It's certainly been a useful star for navigational purposes. Even the ancient people used it to travel. But as far as it having any knowledge of your father, I am afraid that is pure fancy.

MIRANDA

My father told me that the Paiute tribe believed it had once been a mountain goat. The goat was called Nah-gah. Nah-gah loved to climb. Anytime he saw a high peak, he was compelled to reach the top. He wandered the earth always climbing mountains. Whether there was snow or sleet, he climbed. If he was hungry, he climbed. If he was thirsty, he climbed. He sacrificed all his creature comforts to climb to the sky. The Creator was so enamored of his dedication to climbing that he thought, "This remarkable goat should have a place up high. Why don't I place him in the sky?" And He transformed him into a fixed star that would serve as a beacon for travelers throughout the ages. My father said he acted as a lighthouse for people at sea.

OTTO

A sweet story with no basis in science.

MIRANDA

Nevertheless, a sweet story that celebrates a much-loved star. I wish the Creator would place me in the sky.

OTTO

Would you be satisfied to be in a fixed place for eons?

MIRANDA

I'd be satisfied to have a clear look at my family. Why I could see things that happened to them before I was born.

OTTO

Imaginative but not as astonishing as its reality.

MIRANDA

"What is fanciful becomes reality." Didn't you just tell me that?

OTTO

You do listen! But your climbing goat doesn't offer the truth of the star. Don't get too wound up in the fanciful. It can ignite a spark to encourage the science. But it won't sustain you. It's the science that keeps us alive. It's the science that will allow my passengers to survive. It's what I fall back on when I realize how dependent they are on me. They need food and warmth. Especially the children.

MIRANDA

Wouldn't you love a chance to go back and fix stuff? So your ship wouldn't sink.

OTTO

We can't go back. We are a forward-looking race.

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 stay here forever? You know, if we had years of survival stuff – and we could just be here and feel the approval of the stars?

OTTO

Your flight of fancy is showing itself again. The stars neither approve nor disapprove.

MIRANDA

I feel connected here. I imagine a molecule in my body is saying, "Remember when we were up here together? Remember when you were in the stars with me?" Of course that was before the star blew up and found its way into my body. Who knows? Maybe one of those stars was my friend.

OTTO

Such a story. But that's all it is – a story.

MIRANDA

But there's some truth to it. There's something in me that came from them.

OTTO

There is a lot in you that came from them. In a roundabout way.

MIRANDA

Maybe we return to them. That would give me a happily-ever-after.

OTTO

You could look at the amazement of the universe existing 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 – why isn't there an end to sadness? Every day I miss my father more. Every day I think of things I want to tell him and every day I get this hurt back when I remember I can't tell him anything anymore.

OTTO

Physics can explain some of that.

MIRANDA

Physics can't explain my grief.

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 – even when they 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. Now, if you stimulated particle number one, it would react. It will then look for “its” friend-particle-number-two” to also respond to the stimulus. After all, they always did things together. But if particle-number-two dies, particle-number-one would continue to send off energy looking for particle-two.

MIRANDA

So I am sending all this energy – to nowhere?

OTTO

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

MIRANDA

You lost me.

OTTO

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

MIRANDA

So I send out the memory of camping with my father and the energy returns to me as pain.

OTTO

For now. Maybe each time you send out a memory, what returns to you will change – be transformed. Changed into gratitude that you had such a father. It's not a guarantee but a thought.

MIRANDA

Right now I am in this world where I am afraid to forget him but remembering hurts. But for some reason, remembering him here in the arctic doesn't hurt as much. Maybe that's why I feel safe here.

OTTO

It's a precarious safety I am doing all I can to have us rescued. The ice is sinking.

MIRANDA

But it's February. Winter.

OTTO

It's March.

MIRANDA

But you said February just a few minutes ago.

OTTO

You are out of earth time and in Universe time. It varies. Rescue is coming and when I leave – you leave. Immerse yourself in the sky while you can.

(OTTO and MIRANDA sit and watch the night sky.)

MIRANDA

Look at how bright some of the stars are. And then others are so dim – like they are shy. Hiding. Not wanting to be found.

OTTO

It has to do with distance. And of course their size.

MIRANDA

I suppose. But I like to think it's all the fault of that trickster, Coyote.

OTTO

You're train of thought is full of surprises.

MIRANDA

Well, if the Fire-God wasn't so slow and methodical –

OTTO

- Fire-God?

MIRANDA

From the days of long ago and far away. When the earth was young. And dark.

OTTO

I am not following you.

MIRANDA

Keep up! I'm following the starlight. Or rather, the time before the starlight. When the earth was dark and people kept bumping into one another at night because they couldn't see. The sun had set but the outside was black – darker than the nights we know of. They had been given fire, but you couldn't keep a fire going all the time, that would be too smoky.

OTTO

Is the coyote coming into your tale anytime soon?

MIRANDA

Be patient. The Fire-God looked around and said, "This won't do. I must help my people."

OTTO

So, he gave them a coyote?

MIRANDA

No. But he had a blanket of stars which had always confused him. Why did the Creator give him a blanket of stars? And then he thought, "Aha! I am supposed to use them to light up the night." But there were hundreds, thousands maybe even millions of stars in the blanket.

OTTO

If the Fire-God had studied science, he would have known that our Milky Way alone would have over 300 billion stars.

MIRANDA

The Fire-God had no formal science training. He had to deduce knowledge from what was given to him.

OTTO

And that would be –

MIRANDA

The blanket of stars. The Fire-God carefully studied the sky and each night he would place some stars so that they would shine on different parts of the earth. He was quite methodical. Once a star was placed, he ignited it with his torch. This went on for some time. The stars in the blanket seemed to multiply. Still, night after night, the Fire-God dutifully worked on placing each star carefully in the sky. His work was noticed by the people on earth. But the night sky remained dim. He didn't know it but he was being observed by a coyote. The coyote liked the small

MIRANDA (cont'd)

twinklings coming from the sky and wanted more. He didn't understand why the Fire-God was doing his work so slowly. Finally, after weeks of watching the Fire-God, the coyote leapt up as far as he could and grabbed the blanket and shook it like a dog with a stuffed animal. He shook it and shook it until all the stars were flung every which way. The sky was littered with stars. There was just enough light for the people to see at night. There were stars near and far. Some were grouped together and others were by their lonesome. Which is why the sky can look so haphazard at night.

OTTO

And it has nothing to do with the laws of the universe or physics.

MIRANDA

Of course not.

OTTO

It was all the coyote's doing.

MIRANDA

Amazing, isn't it?

OTTO

What if I told you that the physics is even more amazing. And it is your future. You will learn such things – things we just had an inkling of when I was at the University. Particle physics will be the future. It is everything. The stars, the planets, you and me are all made out of particles of matter. We love to say we are “star stuff” which is correct. But that phrase is so – poetical and lyrical – and you know – “nice.” It's much more romantic than announcing we have the same make-up as a cockroach. Which we do.

MIRANDA

Somehow you just took away the magic I was feeling out here.

OTTO

The make-up is not exactly the same as a human but guess what? The molecules are made of atoms which make up everything. You. Me. And that pesky cockroach. But you know what's really amazing? Inside these atoms there are these tiny electrons buzzing around them and then – inside *the atom* – are you still with me – are these protons and neutrons and there's more. 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?

MIRANDA

Why are you telling me this? Because as you may have figured out, when it comes to physics – I'm on a “need to know” basis.

OTTO

Because you want a new theory. Because you want to know more. Because it is the future. We talked about how particles need each other. But what I failed to mention is 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 –

MIRANDA

- I won't –

OTTO

- You never know – because you may find new ways to solve scientific problems. Find answers I don't have. That's the future. Your future. You'll have a new way to question stuff. And maybe you'll get there. It's too late for me. I left this world in 1956.

MIRANDA

Wait – you're like – dead?

OTTO

Not now. But in your world. I'm afraid so.

MIRANDA

You said you were a friend of my father's. But the timing doesn't work. He wasn't born before 1956. You lied.

OTTO

I stretched the truth. I knew him because he kept me alive by reading about me and researching me. But it was hard going because of the Cold War. Information didn't come easily and eventually, he went on to other pursuits.

MIRANDA

Who are you?

OTTO

Dr. Otto Julevich Schmidt. Hero of the Soviet Union, brilliant mathematician, astute physicist, fearless arctic explorer, philosopher –

MIRANDA

Who are you *to me*?

OTTO

Well if my father and your great, great, great grandfather were brothers – how many greats are we up to?

MIRANDA

Three.

OTTO

That's right. Maybe three maybe four. I think your father was three greats – so if you are four that would make you fourth cousin or maybe my first cousin four times removed. I'm never sure.

MIRANDA

I thought you were a brilliant mathematician.

OTTO

Yes. But now we're segueing into genealogy and that was never my strong suit.

MIRANDA

So, we're related.

OTTO

Indeed we are.

MIRANDA

And why are you here?

OTTO

You summoned me.

MIRANDA

How could I summon you when I didn't know anything about you? Unless ...

OTTO

I sense a flight of fancy coming.

MIRANDA

He could have done this. You don't know.

OTTO

I will confess to enjoying this little interlude. Maybe it's best to not question it. When we have no way of knowing the answer.

(The lights change and dance.)

MIRANDA

Maybe the sky is the answer. Look! It's talking to us.

OTTO

The aurora borealis.

MIRANDA

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

OTTO

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

MIRANDA

I like my father's 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 over the ocean!

(MIRANDA does so. The lights enhance his lines.)

OTTO (cont'd)

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

MIRANDA

- A 3-D painting!

OTTO

Created by the natural world.

MIRANDA

I think if the sky can surprise and create like this it's a sign that we don't know everything. I think what I want – a mirror up there shining on the earth as it was months ago – can be possible. I just don't know how yet. But I believe the sky can give me 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 a mirror up there – then what? Are you sure of what you'll 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 am offering you a life-line but you insist at 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 would 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 – lik Star Trek.

OTTO

Star – what?

MIRANDA

Never mind. I just think maybe we'll find a way of moving through the universe that doesn't require being propelled into space. Maybe we can change our atomic make-up – I don't know – that's not part of my theory. My part is – when we get a mirror up there – we will see the past.

(MIRANDA moves away. The ice starts to split apart. You can do this with lights. There is movement from the ice.)

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. The ice is cracking.

MIRANDA

I'm fine. I –

OTTO

You're going to sink.

(MIRANDA looks around and realizes OTTO is right.)

OTTO

Jump! JUMP!

MIRANDA

It's too far. I'll swim. I'm a good swimmer.

OTTO

No! The cold will shock you. You'll gasp. Your muscles freeze – I've seen it. Jump now!

MIRANDA

I can't. Come here.

(OTTO takes a running jump and lands near MIRANDA.)

OTTO

We have to get back on solid ice. Are you ready? We're going to take one long running jump.

MIRANDA

No!

OTTO

You can do this.

(ICE cracks.)

OTTO (cont'd)

NOW!

(Ice cracks. Sound of waves. Lights darken and brighten and darken. When they return, MIRANDA is on the ice – OTTO has her huddled in a sleeping back or under blankets. He tucks papers under head.)

OTTO (cont'd)

Rest, little Rybka. Dream a little. I must work. Your time here will end soon.

(OTTO exits. Sounds of waves and winds. The wind grows. MIRANDA slowly wakes up. She feels the papers under her head which confuses her and with a start, she sits up and throws the papers into the air. They scatter. This delights her. She gets up and throws the papers every which way.)

MIRANDA

I remember. I remember! Thank-you, Daddy. You're here. I knew it!

(OTTO enters.)

OTTO

Miranda! What are you doing? My theory – I had it neatly tucked under you for you to read and now it's scattered.

MIRANDA

My father came. I heard him. He called me "Little Rybka." He always called me that. And look what he left me? A reminder of our conversation in high school. He spoke about multiverses. Do you know about that?

OTTO

Yes. It's been mentioned since the dawn of time but never proven.

MIRANDA

Never proven yet. Maybe that's my theory. Maybe I can prove that exists. Maybe somewhere my father isn't dead. He's picking me up from college to go camping. We're together under the stars.

OTTO

It's an unprovable theory.

MIRANDA

In your time. But my father loved the theorizing. So our universe is expanding. It's stretching here and there and everywhere but maybe pieces of it aren't going along with it. Maybe pieces of it stop stretching. You know – if you stretch bread dough, it can only go so far. Maybe in those little pockets, there are bubbles forming – like in yeast dough. And they send off these bubble-pockets of our universe and form a new one. Maybe with different physical properties because it's like – new. So maybe I'm not just existing in our limited 3-D world but in this other bubble. In this other bubble where I made another choice. Where my father is still with us.

(MIRANDA throws some papers into the air.)

Look -they float and fly and sometimes bump into each other – but these papers are unaware of each other – just like our multi-universes. If they were aware maybe they'd lock into each other. Maybe they'd combine. But look at them *(throwing them up again)* – they don't. But they're so close to each other, that when I send out a memory to the universe, maybe it doesn't come back as grief. Maybe that particle is small enough that it jumps into the other universe.

OTTO

My papers! I thought maybe you'd wake up and have a look. It never occurred to me that you'd sail them across the ice.

MIRANDA

Listen to me. My father was here – I heard him.

OTTO

“Little Rybka.” That's what my mother called me.

MIRANDA

That was you? Why is it always you? Pushing your theory on me and ignoring what I need.

OTTO

You're right. I'm trying to give you what I need.

MIRANDA

Particles. How the planets came to be. How does any of that relate to what I am going through?

OTTO

I thought if I gave you truths – beginnings - you could figure out how to move forward.

MIRANDA

Don't you understand anything? I'm trying to go back.

OTTO

Take a good hard look at the present. Your father is with you because you share the same make-up.

MIRANDA

I'm not interested in genetics.

OTTO

Not genes – but stars. This is where our discussion of stardust has truth. You both come from stars that long ago exploded and sent building blocks into the atmosphere – the oxygen in your lungs, the carbon in your muscles, the calcium in your bones – why even the iron in your blood was created by stars bursting.

MIRANDA

That doesn't mean we share the same oxygen or carbon or iron. Maybe my oxygen came from a different star than my father's. Maybe mine came from Cleopatra and his came from Julius Caesar.

OTTO

And where did mine come from?

MIRANDA

Brutus?

OTTO

But our DNA is inherited and it is comprised of stardust. So your stardust is also inherited.

MIRANDA

How does this help me see my father again?

OTTO

It helps you understand that he is always with you.

MIRANDA

Small comfort. I like my mirror theory better.

OTTO

But –

MIRANDA

I know, I know. Don't nag. And to give you more to whine about, I've expanded my theory. So maybe we can't really hang a mirror on stars because they are fiery – I was thinking about satellites. You didn't have satellites but we do. We have thousands and thousands of active

MIRANDA (cont'd)

satellites orbiting the earth in my time. What if we could hang a mirror around the satellites to travel around the stars? If we could do that, maybe we could see a glimpse of the past. I mean – we landed on a comet! Did you know that? How cool is that? Who knows what else we could do?

OTTO

You do live in an exciting time.

MIRANDA

I know! Imagine a world where these giant mirrors float through space on these satellites. 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 –

OTTO

- Wouldn't that make you hurt more?

MIRANDA

No. They'd bring them to light. The truth. You like the truth, right? I'm starting to doubt myself. Those camping trips, his stories. Every day those memories move further away. You know how you say the universe is expanding and other galaxies are further away all the time? My memory is like that. Every morning, what I remember is further away and I can't always grasp it. And I want to. But I don't know what's accurate anymore. What's true and what I wish were true. But if there was a universe-memory-bank – of every memory – from every speck of stardust – I could look it up.

OTTO

You're sounding fanciful again.

MIRANDA

Maybe. But physics is starting to look like a bunch of science-fiction 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. People made fun of those dreaming scientists, didn't they? But the dreamers 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.

OTTO

I admit it's not a bad way to spend your life.

MIRANDA

Of course, I could be like you. It could wind up being one of those discarded theories. I could work my whole life on something that will never work.

OTTO

So you have to love the process.

MIRANDA

Even if the process comes to nothing?

OTTO

I think it always comes to “something.” Wrong answers can lead to correct ones. Today my theory of accretion carries some weight. The planets did start out as dust just as I thought. My proposal that the sun passed through a dense cloud and emerged covered with dust and gas that became planets was where I went wrong. But our planets – I had the beginnings right. Who knows? Maybe you will have the beginnings right?

MIRANDA

I’m starting to understand why trying to propose a new theory can take years. And new theories can scare people.

OTTO

Which I never understood. We have always thirsted for knowledge and when it comes – it can upset the hierarchy. People have died because of their theories.

MIRANDA

I’d prefer that didn’t happen to me.

OTTO

Agree. In the end, science comes out. It refuses to stay hidden. Even though sometimes it rears its head before people are ready for it - but in the end – it wins.

MIRANDA

So you’re not discounting my theory.

OTTO

I still see your theory as pseudo-science But I am aware that pseudo-science can develop and become possible science.

MIRANDA

Thank you.

OTTO

And it’s an improvement over the multi-verse theory.

MIRANDA

Wait. I didn’t say I was letting go of it.

OTTO

But –

MIRANDA

- It has some merit. Look at these two pieces of paper. The paper is us – right now. You and me. And this paper – maybe it's my Dad and you and me, We're on top of each other but unaware that the other paper exists. And maybe – here – there's other paper where my mom didn't die and we're all ready to visit the North Pole together. It's possible! I wonder what I'm like on this piece of paper. Happy? Relaxed?

OTTO

Surly?

MIRANDA

Possibly. The thing is – we don't know. Remember the earth used to be flat. Then people proposed that the sun revolved around the earth. All that was believed. Accepted. A round earth? *Whoa! Pretty far-fetched to most people. Let's burn them at the stake!* I don't know what's true. And neither do you. A stardust-memory bank? Maybe. Multi-verses. Again – maybe. There's so many possibilities – including those that I haven't thought of yet. Those that true scientists haven't proposed. The reality is – we just don't know.

OTTO

And you like that?

MIRANDA

I love that. *(Beat.)* That's why I need to stay here. With you. To learn – to question – to theorize. You'd like that, wouldn't you?

OTTO

That's not possible. You belong in your own time.

MIRANDA

But if I go back with you – maybe I'd be alive when my father was born. Maybe I really could see him one last time.

OTTO

You need to go forward.

MIRANDA

I will – with your help. I need this. Please.

OTTO

It's possible – theoretically speaking of course – that 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.

OTTO

But – it was the truck. The truck that sped through the light.

MIRANDA

My father was in that intersection because of me.

OTTO

It was an accident – random. Unfortunately our universe can be all too random.

MIRANDA

You don't know about the choice I made that morning. Dad was going to take me back to college. I said, "no." Chelsea was picking me up so he wouldn't have to make that long drive. I've kept this inside me for months – but I know if I had let him drive me, he'd still be here. He wouldn't be dead. And maybe in this paper – this multiverse – he did drive me back to school and he's still with me today.

OTTO

Miranda – listen –

MIRANDA

I'm done listening. I need to find my way back to that moment. To my father. To tell him I'm sorry. I need to figure out stuff. Somewhere out there is another point in time – somewhere – he's there – waiting. And I need to meet up with him – connect with him – discover a way to see him *one last time!*

OTTO

Stop – please –

MIRANDA

NO! *I'm going to find my father!*

(MIRANDA runs off and exits. OTTO calls after her. And soon we hear ANYA'S voice.)

OTTO

Miranda! MIRANDA!

(OTTO is gone. MIRANDA appears – on another part of the stage.)

ANYA'S VOICE

Mir-an-da! Mir-an-da!

MIRANDA

Daddy! Are you here? Tell me you're here.

ANYA'S VOICE

Miranda?

MIRANDA

Not you, Grandma. I'm sorry – not you. I need my father.

(Sounds of wind and ice cracking.)

Do your stuff, ice. Crack. Sink. I don't care. I'm sinking anyway. I'm going to meet my father.

OTTO'S VOICE

Miranda?

MIRANDA

Don't come. Don't come. Don't find me. Let my father find me.

(We hear voices calling Miranda's name on top of each other. Maybe it's just OTTO'S VOICE and ANYA'S VOICE. MIRANDA clasps her ears. She tries not to hear but she does.)

MIRANDA (cont'd)

Stop!

(And the VOICES stop. MIRANDA looks around and finally takes stock in what she sees.)

MIRANDA (cont'd)

You're not here, are you Daddy? You're gone. Truly gone.

(An airplane flies overhead. OTTO appears.)

OTTO

Miranda!

MIRANDA

Don't come any closer. The ice is sinking. Don't try to save me.

OTTO

I won't.

MIRANDA

Well, that's a nice change.

OTTO

The rescue planes are coming. One plane landed today. Another plane will come and then another plane. And when all my stranded passengers have made it off the ice, I will leave. We will all be gone soon.

MIRANDA

Not me. I'm staying put.

OTTO

You will leave. Your time on the ice is ending. You have no choice.

MIRANDA

This is the only place I've been that doesn't carry memories of him. It's my safe place.

OTTO

It's time to go home.

MIRANDA

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

OTTO

You don't know that.

MIRANDA

What do you know? You talk a lot but you sure don't listen.

OTTO

Point taken.

MIRANDA

My father always took me back to college. But my roommate said she'd swing by and take me up. Save my father the trip. And it was fun – you know? Whenever we went somewhere together, we'd load up on junk food and play music – way too loud – and then sing along to the music – always off-key. But – it was fun. And I thought – it was a win for my father and me. He didn't need to drive the six hours to school and then the six hours back alone. I know he loved to tell me stories on the trip up – he loved talking about when the world was young and there was a time I wanted to crawl into his stories and live there. Maybe I always wanted the past. Never today. Never the future.

OTTO

Miranda –

MIRANDA

Listen! That morning, I just wanted to have a fun trip before the academic grind would begin again. I already knew his stories and the thought of just singing my brains out with Chelsea would be a change. And it was. It was fun. I loved it. I enjoyed it all. But back at home, he was gone. Gone before I reached school. There was a phone call waiting for me. From my grandmother. "Come home." And I did.

That night the sun set at its usual time. The stars came out. My world was shattered. But the universe didn't even blink. It 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 I feel him without pain. I want to stay here.

OTTO

You'll sink here.

MIRANDA

I'm sinking there!

OTTO

Listen, Little Rybka –

MIRANDA

- My father always called me that.

OTTO

As did mine. You'll always feel him. Here.

(OTTO points to his heart.)

OTTO (cont'd)

And here.

(OTTO points to his head. Then he holds out his hands.)

And in your shared stardust that is both of you everywhere.

(OTTO takes her hand.)

And in those stories you got from him. I was a bit hasty discounting them but those stories are his gift to you. His gift for you to pass on. In the last few weeks, my stranded passengers were getting antsy. They were bored. They started swiping at each other. There was nothing for their minds to hold on to. So I started reading to them. I had a book of Russian history and I read them a chapter every night.

MIRANDA

How'd that go?

OTTO

About as well as explaining physics to you. But a few nights later, something happened. One woman suggested we tell stories – about our families, about the life we were aching to return to and then something magic happened. Everyone was engaged. Sometimes it was about a beloved pet. Other stories centered on holidays and food, the birth of a child, the enchantment of the neighboring woods. And soon everyone was looking forward to story hour. The days were spent cooking and building an airstrip and the nights were filled with fellowship, laughter and occasional tears. You and your father were right about stories. They connect us.

MIRANDA

Thank-you for that.

OTTO

You know I have to leave you.

MIRANDA

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

OTTO

If it's a worthy theory, it will return. If not, I am content to have a minor planet named after me. And an island. And a laboratory.

MIRANDA

You never did get that modest gene, did you?

OTTO

I don't believe in hiding your light. Nor should you. I have a glimmer of hope that once home, 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. As hard as when I left this world and my own sons. But there are people waiting for you. Anya.

ANYA'S VOICE (Calling)

Miranda?

MIRANDA

Grandma.

OTTO

Yes. She has my mother's name. She's had too many losses. Her husband and now her son. She can't lose her granddaughter. She's not leaving you anytime soon. I promise you that. I know that 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 even though you thought you were collapsing, your mind was heating up. It was questioning, thinking, investigating, even wishing. You went on collecting new piece of your father – yes, your father, and your grandmother – and 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

You will find it replaced with something new that you learned.

MIRANDA

I wasn't looking for a true theory. I was just looking for my father. I still think he's somewhere is mixed-up stardust.

OTTO

I'll give you that possibility.

MIRANDA

Wait. Are you letting me get away with the fanciful?

OTTO

Yes.

MIRANDA

Do you think that there could be multiverses? That he could be perched somewhere in another universe.

OTTO

What do you think?

MIRANDA

I don't know.

OTTO

And that's where you begin. You don't know but need to find out. And you'll never find out unless you return to your own time.

MIRANDA

What if it's all science fiction?

OTTO

What if it's real?

MIRANDA

I don't know the difference.

OTTO

That's a perfect beginning statement to your fanciful thoughts.

MIRANDA

My father gave me all these stories about the stars. And now, you've given me a touch of the science. Which is the beginning? The stories or the stars?

OTTO

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

MIRANDA

It will take years to understand.

OTTO

And 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.

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 the paths. Or both of them.

(Airplane noise.)

OTTO

It's time.

MIRANDA

But I haven't –

OTTO

- Shh. You've stalled long enough. We both have to go home.

MIRANDA

Will I remember this or will this also become a foggy memory?

OTTO

You will probably think of it as a dream. It will be the only explanation that you will understand in your time.

MIRANDA

But it isn't, is it?

OTTO

What do you think? My plane is here. Swim home, little fish, little Rybka. I have loved getting to know you. I'll miss you.

(OTTO turns and exits without looking back.)

MIRANDA (to herself)

Back to you, Rybka, Big Fish. I'll miss you, too.

ANYA'S VOICE

Miranda?

MIRANDA

Coming, Grandma. I'm coming.

(Airplane noise that lessens as it gets further away.)

Safe travels, Rybka. Thank-you, Otto.

(Maybe one last pass of the airplane. The stars glisten and then fade to black.)

END OF PLAY

