

STAR BRIGHT

written by

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ACT I

SCENE 1

Outside the home of GRACE and CALVIN. GRACE is looking at the stars through a telescope. She is bundled against the cold. There is a sapling tree in the yard beside her. Downstage is a "For Sale" sign in the yard. CALVIN enters.

CALVIN

Dinner's ready.

CALVIN is hesitant to interrupt, but is desperate to connect.

See anything good?

GRACE

The universe is agnostic, Calvin. Nothing good or bad about any of it.

CALVIN

(Optimistically)

I made pasta.

GRACE

It simply *is*.

CALVIN

Pasta?

GRACE

The universe.

CALVIN

Coming in?

GRACE

Did you set a place for Abby?

CALVIN

I did.

GRACE unglues herself from the eyepiece.

GRACE

I'll be in soon. Keep it warm for me?

CALVIN

How long?

GRACE

A few more minutes. That's all.

CALVIN

It's freezing out. Are you warm enough?

GRACE

Cold is the best way to look at the sky. Everything's clearer in the dead of winter.

GRACE resumes looking through the telescope.

CALVIN

You're right. It's beautiful. I can see why you love it.

(Pause)

You know, I've been thinking about this. And I think, and just hear me out, but, I think if you talk to Davidson--

GRACE

Davidson? You're kidding.

CALVIN

If you just *talk* to him. Just talk. He could get you some time at the observatory.

GRACE

Oh, sure. He *could*.

CALVIN

I'm sure he could. Don't you think?

GRACE

He could. But he won't.

CALVIN

Why not?

GRACE

Because he won't. Because you don't just drop by. It's not a pot luck.

CALVIN

He could make room. You're not just some person. It's you.

GRACE

It's booked two years in advance.

CALVIN

But how booked is booked?

GRACE

Booked solid. Wall-to-wall grad students hunting for black holes, dark matter, and fame, especially. And even if it wasn't, I'd get no sympathy. Davidson has a singularity where his soul should be.

CALVIN

Have you asked him?

GRACE

No. But I know what he would say. I can hear his voice in my head like a silent alarm.

CALVIN

It's only been a year. You don't just forget about somebody because they--

GRACE

He fired me, Calvin.

CALVIN

No.

GRACE

What do you call it, then?

CALVIN

I'm not defending him.

GRACE

Then what do you call it?

CALVIN

OK. He fired you. But not because you did anything wrong.

GRACE

Unless you count having a nervous breakdown in front of the board of directors.

CALVIN

Is that what he said?

GRACE

That's what *they* called it.

CALVIN

That is completely unfair.

GRACE

It's an excuse.

CALVIN

I mean, what does he expect? Who schedules a mandatory meeting the day after a funeral? Especially...

CALVIN is hesitant to continue down this line of inquiry. The funeral is an especially raw topic for GRACE.

What does he expect?

GRACE

He expected me to fall apart. And he was right.

CALVIN

You don't deserve that.

GRACE

You should tell him.

CALVIN

I would. If you'd let me. I'd march right in there...

GRACE

Oh, I know.

CALVIN

Just say the word. I'll fight him.

GRACE

Who knows? He might even listen to *you*. You have a penis.

CALVIN

Allegedly.

GRACE

I'm a threat. In *his* world, a woman with a brain and a trace of ambition is an absolute threat. I don't think it's even conscious for him. That's how he's wired. In the reptilian part of the brain, the underbelly. He's been terrified of me since I got there.

When I was a credible PhD with published research, the board was on my side. But it doesn't matter how smart you are, or how qualified. Once they label you the "crazy" one, all bets are off.

CALVIN

So that's it? They're just going to hang you out to dry?

GRACE

No. It's worse than that. He called this morning. Left a message.

CALVIN

You didn't tell me that. What'd he say?

GRACE

Made me a job offer.

CALVIN
He ... what?

GRACE
Yeah. Visiting scholar.

CALVIN
What is that?

GRACE
An insult.

CALVIN
What about your old job?

GRACE
He filled it months ago. This is his game. If I want back in badly enough, he knows I'll have to play.

CALVIN
What's the pay?

GRACE doesn't respond.

Well, shit.

GRACE resumes looking through the telescope.

CALVIN (CONT'D)
Do you need me to get you your --

GRACE sighs heavily and does not look away from the telescope.

GRACE
I took them already.

(Pause)

CALVIN
What's so interesting up there tonight?

GRACE
Dust.

CALVIN
Can dust wait until after dinner? I'm gonna eat my own hand in a minute. There's plenty of dust in the guest room if you need a fix.

GRACE
Cosmic dust. A nebula, actually. Here. Look.

CALVIN looks into the telescope.

CALVIN

Looks like an eye.

GRACE

They call it the eye of god.

CALVIN

Eerie.

GRACE

It's a solar nursery. All the elements that make up life. The remains of a supernova, most likely. One day it'll condense into a ball, heat up to millions of degrees, and give birth to a new star. The universe never lets anything go to waste.

I had a dream last night. About Abby.

We were sitting here on the grass, right here, looking up at the stars, like we used to do. She said something to me. I haven't been able to shake it.

CALVIN

What was it?

GRACE

She said, "Mommy, you have to come and find me." And she pointed into the sky and when I looked up, this is what I saw.

The night she was born, a gamma ray burst was detected coming from this same point in the sky. So close to Earth. So close to us. It was unprecedented. That's how I knew she was special. And now she's gone.

CALVIN

Grace, what do you need?

GRACE

I need to feel like I'm not alone. I need a reason, one solid, concrete reason to stop feeling like I'm the only one in the universe.

CALVIN

I'm here. You're not alone.

GRACE doesn't respond.

I'll keep dinner warm. Just come in when you're ready.

SCENE 2

The dinner table. Calvin is seated, killing time on his phone. GRACE enters from outside. CALVIN and GRACE, once seated, sit on either end of the table from one another. A third chair sits empty between them.

CALVIN pockets the phone and jumps up to serve dinner.

CALVIN

There you are. I was starting to worry there might be a killer asteroid on the loose.

GRACE sits, in a state of numbness. She doesn't look CALVIN in the eyes. Too painful.

GRACE

If there was, I wouldn't tell you.

CALVIN

(Offering)

You want bread?

GRACE

What?

CALVIN

Garlic bread. I'm having some.

GRACE

No. No bread.

CALVIN

Ok. I'm taking yours. Starving.

CALVIN enters with two plates. Dinner is served. He digs in immediately. GRACE has no appetite, and picks at her meal.

CALVIN (CONT'D)

So. Why not?

GRACE

Why not, what?

CALVIN

You said you wouldn't tell me. If you saw the sky falling. Why not?

GRACE

You wouldn't want to know.

CALVIN
 (Mouth full)
 No, I definitely would.

GRACE
 Why? There'd be nothing you could do about it.

CALVIN
 Of course we'd do something about it.

GRACE
 Like what?

CALVIN
 Call somebody important.

GRACE
 Like who?

CALVIN
 NASA. NASA's gotta have a plan. Shoot a bunch of astronauts into space on a flaming rocket filled will guns or lasers or something? Save the world?

GRACE
 You've seen too many movies.

CALVIN
 They could deflect it.

GRACE
 With what?

CALVIN
 I dunno. You're the scientist. Either way, we'd have to tell somebody. And they'd stop it. Then you'd be a hero.

GRACE
 There's no plan. No lasers. There's absolutely nothing that scientists or politicians or the military could do that would be worth doing.

CALVIN
 That can't be true.

Playfully defiant.

I don't believe you.

GRACE
 Believe it. It's an impossible problem. The asteroid that killed the dinosaurs--

CALVIN

Allegedly.

GRACE

How fast you think that was going?

CALVIN

(Guessing blindly)

I don't know. A thousand miles an hour.

GRACE

Not even close.

CALVIN

That was the fastest number I could think of.

GRACE

Try 72 thousand miles per hour.

CALVIN

How fast *is* that?

GRACE

It would circle the Earth in 21 minutes. By the time you spotted it, it would be too late.

CALVIN

Aren't we tracking most of them anyway?

GRACE

Only the ones we know about.

CALVIN

Are there lots we don't know about?

GRACE

We see three or four near-misses every year. It's just a matter of time.

CALVIN

So maybe we don't have time to strap a laser to a rocket and shoot it into space or whatever. Still. We've got nukes.

GRACE

What do you think that would do? Just disintegrate it?

CALVIN

At the risk of sounding stupid, yes. That's what I thought it would do.

GRACE

It would just break apart. You'd turn one giant meteor into several. You wouldn't save us. You'd kill us faster.

CALVIN
Make a helluva movie, though.

GRACE
The technology for salvation simply does not exist. Anyone who tells you otherwise is trying to sell you something.

CALVIN
Well, that's not depressing at all.

(Pause)

So why are so many astronomers hunting for these things all the time? Didn't you say that's, like, the prevailing obsession for most of these guys? Asteroid hunter? Why track 'em if it won't do any good?

GRACE
Naming rights.

CALVIN
Really?

GRACE
Yep. You spot it, you name it.

CALVIN
Even for a bunch of introverted PhDs, that seems overwhelmingly petty.

GRACE
They may be scientists, but they're almost all men. And men love almost nothing in the world more than getting to put their names on things. Especially things that go really fast. It's like a Lamborghini with a vanity plate. But for nerds.

CALVIN
Sounds very mid-life crisis.

GRACE
Basically. You can't exactly put "Eat Dust" on your license plate when you drive a second-hand station wagon. Some guys have affairs. These guys hunt space rock.

CALVIN
Whatever pays the bills, I guess.

(Pause)

Speaking of. I got a call.

GRACE
What? When?

CALVIN
When you were outside. Just now. From Mike.

GRACE
Realtor Mike?

CALVIN
Mmm hmm. You know that couple that saw the house last week?

GRACE
The ones with the rodent dog, or the ones with the free-range toddler?

CALVIN
The ones with the hybrid car.

GRACE
Ugh. *Those* people.

CALVIN
Yeah. They made an offer.

This news does not sit well with GRACE.

GRACE
Good for them.

(Pause)

What?

CALVIN
I think...

GRACE
You're not suggesting?

CALVIN
I think we need to take it.

GRACE
I don't like those people. Alan and what's-her-name.

CALVIN
Allison.

GRACE
Ugh. The way they talk about real estate like it's some kind of lifestyle accessory. The gables this and curb appeal that. You're buying someone's life out from under them. It's a home, not a hobby.

CALVIN
It's just business.

GRACE
They're like white collar mercenaries.

CALVIN
They are. I know. But...

(Pause)

We haven't paid the mortgage in 3 months.

GRACE
I know.

CALVIN
After this, we're down to selling scrap metal and spare kidneys.

GRACE
(Irritated)
I said I know.

CALVIN
And it's a good offer. Not great, but, for the market...

GRACE
Fine. Sell it.

(Pause)

What?

CALVIN
Don't do that.

GRACE
What? I said sell it. You win.

CALVIN
It's not about winning. I want you to be OK with this.

GRACE
You want me to be OK.

CALVIN
Yes.

GRACE
I'm never going to be OK with it. Never. So you might as well sell it.

CALVIN
Grace, don't make this my fault.

GRACE doesn't respond.

As the tension here builds, Calvin and Claire begin to talk over each other.

Moving forward, suggested overlap indicated by "/" in the interrupted line.

This is the right thing to do. We can't afford / this place on my salary.

GRACE

I already said I know that. You don't have to / keep bringing it up.

CALVIN

So then you agree. You agree that this / is what we have to do.

GRACE

You don't get it! You know what you're doing? You're selling her house. That's what you're doing. Selling her childhood, selling her memory. There's not enough money in the entire world...

GRACE is suddenly paralyzed by this flood of conflicting emotions. She is more angry with herself for feeling the grief than she is consumed by it.

CALVIN crosses to GRACE to try to comfort her. She resists.

CALVIN

Hey. Look at me.

GRACE

I can't.

CALVIN

Why?

GRACE

I just can't.

CALVIN

Why not?

GRACE

Your eyes.

(Pause)

It's your eyes. I don't see you. I see her.

CALVIN
You can't just not look at me.

GRACE
That's all I can do. Not look.

CALVIN
It's ok.

GRACE
It's not ok. It's not. I'm strong. I'm smart. I'm supposed to be able to ... to --

CALVIN
That has nothing to do with --

GRACE
To figure this out. And one minute I'm fine--

CALVIN
You don't have to be fine. No one's saying that.

And we talk, and it's good--

CALVIN
It *is* good. I missed doing this.

GRACE
And for a half a second I forget, I let myself feel normal, and I look at you and ... and all I can see are her eyes. She got my nose, my hair, even my stupid, crooked toes. The only thing she got of yours was your eyes. And now I can't look.

CALVIN
You can.

GRACE
I can't. If I do, I'll shatter.

CALVIN
What can I do?

GRACE
Nothing.

CALVIN
You need to eat.

GRACE
I can't. Tastes like ... cardboard.

CALVIN
I'm sorry. I tried.

GRACE

It's not your fault. I just--

CALVIN

(Attempts to cheer her up)

It's fine, really. It's fine. One day ... one day soon ... you'll feel better, and I'll make you dinner, and you'll take a bite of pasta, or chili or tacos, and it'll be the best bite of food you've ever had in your life. Because you've only been tasting cardboard for as long as you can remember.

GRACE gives a reluctant half-smile.

CALVIN (CONT'D)

And you'll say, Calvin, that was the best bite of food I ever had in my life. And then I'll get a really big head about it. Quit my job, take out a huge loan, buy a food truck, start making everyone call me "chef"--

GRACE

(Amused, but unable to fully laugh at the absurdity)

Oh, no.

CALVIN

Oh yeah. It'll be a taco-pasta-chili fusion thing, with a stupid trendy name like "Spork," and everything will be all farm-to-table, sustainable, organic, blah blah bullshit, and the food will be absolute garbage. All because you told me it was good one time. A total disaster.

GRACE

You'd do better than that.

CALVIN

And we'll be bankrupt, homeless and destitute, all because you told me it was actually good. One time. But you know what? It won't matter. Because we'll be laughing again. I promise.

GRACE

You promise?

CALVIN

I got you.

GRACE

I know.

CALVIN

This will get easier. I promise it will get easier.

When? GRACE

Soon. CALVIN

(Pause)

I have to call Mike back. He's waiting for an answer. I'm sorry.

GRACE
(With equal parts guilt and
resentment)
Me too. Me too.

GRACE pokes at her food. CALVIN exits.

SCENE 3

Inside the bedroom of Abigail, an 8-year-old girl, who died one year ago.

The room is decorated in star charts, a toy telescope, posters of the planets. Abigail, like her mother, was obsessed with outer space.

GRACE is beginning the difficult task of boxing up her belongings. She is carrying a CARDBOARD box.

A MUSIC BOX in the shape of the solar system sits on the bed.

GRACE is preparing to enter ABBY's room, when she hears the MUSIC BOX playing. GRACE enters ABBY's room to find the MUSIC BOX playing of its own accord, and no one around. She drops the cardboard box.

GRACE

Who turned you on, huh?

GRACE turns off the music box and looks around for what may have caused it to start playing, but finds nothing.

Calvin?

(Pause)

Cal?

CALVIN does not respond. GRACE is alone.

GRACE examines the MUSIC BOX a little closer. Holds it in her hands. Feels the weight of it. Watches as its mechanisms move the planets in their cosmic dance as the music plays more and more slowly.

GRACE holds the MUSIC BOX as it stops playing, an acute reminder of her last moments with ABIGAIL.

GRACE sinks into despair. The task has proven too much for her. As she crashes into full-blown depression, she hears a voice from somewhere ... present, yet absent.

ABIGAIL

Mom?

GRACE is frozen.

(A long pause)

The disembodied voice speaks again.

Mommy, don't cry.

GRACE is this time compelled to move, leaving the MUSIC BOX behind on the bed. GRACE starts to leave the room, but stays pinned just behind the doorframe, unable to stay, unable to run.

Mommy?

GRACE smells something familiar in the air.

GRACE

Lavender.

ABIGAIL

Mommy?

GRACE closes her eyes. The hallucination is too much for her to handle. Her voice is at a whisper.

GRACE

Stop.

ABIGAIL

Mom?

GRACE

I can't.

GRACE covers her eyes with her hands, to gather herself and attempt to shut out the hallucination. The lights begin to dim.

ABIGAIL

Mom?

GRACE breathes methodically as the lights fade to black.

GRACE

Please. Please stop. Please.

As GRACE lowers her hands and opens her eyes, the lights fade in. ABIGAIL is seated on the bed, holding the music box.

ABIGAIL

Mom?

GRACE cannot take her eyes off of the apparition of ABIGAIL, but also does not dare go near her. When she speaks, it is to herself, quiet, yet without calm.

GRACE

Oh.

ABIGAIL

Mom, why do the planets go around the sun?

GRACE

Baby girl.

ABIGAIL

If gravity pulls on them, why don't they just fall in?

GRACE

You came back to me.

ABIGAIL

Crash, into the star, and everything goes boom.

GRACE

And yet...

ABIGAIL

I think it's cause the planets go sooooooooooooo fast. And they zoom around so the gravity can't get them.

GRACE starts to make her way towards ABIGAIL, slowly, like she's approaching a wounded animal, trying not to scare it away. She almost believes what she is seeing, but the skeptic in her, the scientist, won't allow it.

GRACE

You're not here.

ABIGAIL

It's like a dance. Around the sun.

GRACE

You're gone.

ABIGAIL

A game. They're playing chase.

GRACE

Like we did in the yard.

ABIGAIL

They spin and spin, and run and run.

GRACE

A thousand miles a minute.

ABIGAIL

Round and round.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Round and round.

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

But don't get too close.

GRACE

I won't. I can't.

GRACE sits on the bed, closes her eyes, and reaches out her hand to touch ABIGAIL. The lights begin to fade.

ABIGAIL

Or the game ends. And gravity wins.

A moment before GRACE is able to reach ABIGAIL, the lights go to black.

As the lights fade back in, we see that ABIGAIL has vanished. GRACE is seated on the bed, holding the music box.