

"NORTHERN LIGHTS"

Characters

Charlie - 30s, fragile

Dad: 50s/60s, a retired cop

(CHARLIE and DAD, seated, looking up at the sky. One of Charlie's hands is hidden to the audience.)

CHARLIE

Then there's Cassiopeia - "The Ethiopian Queen." See? It's the "W"-shaped one. That's her throne. (To Dad) I see you checking your watch! (Pause) The five major stars, from left to right - no. We'll go by order of magnitude. Which would you prefer?

DAD

How 'bout alphabetical?

CHARLIE

Anybody could do that ... I know! Distance from Earth. At just 55 light years -

DAD

Charlie.

CHARLIE

What? We're just killing time until the main event.

DAD

Killing it? We've barely laid a glove on it.

CHARLIE

Fine. What would you like to do?

DAD

Sleep. In my own bed.

CHARLIE

Don't be silly, Dad. You're 427 miles from your bed.

DAD

427.

CHARLIE

By car. As the crow flies, it's more like -

DAD

(Stands up) I'm gonna take a nap.

CHARLIE

No! you'll miss it!

DAD

Charlie, I'll be right there in the car.

CHARLIE

But when it comes it'll be too late!

DAD

Son, you dragged me out here -

CHARLIE

You'll have missed the best part -

DAD

In the middle of the -

CHARLIE

(Gets animated, starts gesturing) Th-the instant where it unveils itself, Dad! That's the key! That moment of ... discovery, of transcendence! (The gun in his hand is revealed) It only comes once and we have to do it together. Otherwise ...

(They both contemplate the gun)

DAD

Be careful with that thing, Charlie.

CHARLIE

Oh, I barely know how to use it.

DAD

That's what worries me. (He sits)

CHARLIE

(After a beat, looking to the sky) They punished her. (To Dad) Cassiopeia.

DAD

My mouth tastes like metal. (Takes a swig of water)

CHARLIE

(A beat, then back to the stars) She was banished to the skies, sentenced to swing there, clinging to her chair, spinning round and round the North Star. The upside-down part - it's supposed to humiliate her.

DAD

Charlie, how much longer?

CHARLIE

I really can't say, Dad. The forecast said tonight.

DAD

So it's like the weather.

CHARLIE

Yes ... only less reliable. All I can tell you is we had a major solar storm 48 hours ago. Conditions are favorable. But there are lots of other factors. The intensity. The magnetic field ...

DAD

So we wait ...

CHARLIE

Of course. (A beat.) The skies are full of punishment. (Using the gun to point out constellations.) Callisto was turned into a bear by Jupiter's jealous wife. See? Ursa Major, the Great Bear.

DAD

I thought they put them there to immortalize them ... protect them.

CHARLIE

Protect them? I suppose. They put Orion on the opposite side of the sky from the scorpion that killed him. That was nice. Of course, Cepheus - that's Cassiopeia's husband - Cepheus he went up to the sky by his own right, chasing the Golden Fleece.

DAD

Charlie -

CHARLIE

That's the way to go, all right. On your own terms.

DAD

Charlie ... son ... nothing's been decided.

CHARLIE

Oh, bull!

DAD

Margaret's going to take you in -

CHARLIE

Taurus the Bull, one of the forms taken on by Jupiter -

DAD

She promised to give it a chance -

CHARLIE

When he appeared to Europa, Princess of Phoenicia -

DAD

It doesn't have to be like last time -

CHARLIE

The snowy-white bull with the polished horns and the gentle eyes you can make out the head and the shoulders shining shining like a jewel just to the side of Orion Orion where's Orion? Orion!!

DAD

CHARLIE!!

CHARLIE

(After a long beat) They're going to put me away again.

DAD

No. Not as long as you -

CHARLIE

Don't burn their porch down?

DAD

Well ... yeah. That, too. I was gonna say "behave yourself."

CHARLIE

Oh. (Pause) The pills.

DAD

They're good for you.

CHARLIE

Good for me. They make me not me.

DAD

That's the point.

CHARLIE

(A beat.) Aunt Margeret. She's so ... intolerant.

DAD

She wouldn't appreciate being kidnapped, if that's what you mean.

CHARLIE

(Scoffs) Kidnapped. (Then notes the gun) Oh. (A beat) Mom would have been pretty disappointed in me, huh?

DAD

Your Mom would have made sure my service revolver was locked up.

CHARLIE

Yeah, she was funny. (Pause) How soon?

DAD

Coupla weeks. When I start the next cycle.

CHARLIE

Cancer the giant crab sent by Hera to nip at the heels of Hercules and aid the serpent ... It's a long story. (A beat) Dad, I'll be good. I promise. Then when you come back -

DAD

(Gently) Charlie.

(They exchange a long look, then look away, Charlie down, Dad up.)

Hey, what's that?

CHARLIE

What's what?

DAD

That. The green light. Is that it?

CHARLIE

No, that can't be it.

DAD

Are you sure?

CHARLIE

Maybe, I don't know. (A beat) If it is, it sure sucks.

DAD

I wouldn't say that ...

CHARLIE

It does. It sucks! It's supposed to be ... grand. Dramatic! Breathtaking!!

DAD

It's fine.

CHARLIE

FINE? It's the Aurora-fucking Borealis! It's supposed to be WAY more than fine! Where's the color? Great ... tremoring ribbons of color peeling across the sky! And the sound -

DAD

The sound?

CHARLIE

I expected there to be sound! I dunno, like a crackling or a humming or a whirring!! SOMETHING!

DAD

It's fine without sound!

CHARLIE

(Waving the gun around) Stop saying fine! It's not at all fine!! It's pale and faint and-and not even close to ... transcendent!!

DAD

Look, we just caught it on a bad night, that's all!

CHARLIE

Fuck-up! FUCK-UP FUCK-UP FUCK-UP!! I'm a total fuck-up!!

DAD

You're not a fuck-up! You're just -

CHARLIE

CRAZY!?! (Swings the gun around and points it at Dad)

DAD

A little, yeah!

CHARLIE

I brought you here for nothing. (Swings the gun back and points it at himself)

DAD

Charlie!

CHARLIE

Make a constellation after me, okay!?

DAD

Son, don't!!

CHARLIE

Near the North Star, so it's always there! Summer or winter! I don't mind being upside down! (Closes his eyes and puts the gun to his head.)

DAD

Charlie, no!!

CHARLIE

(Pulls the trigger and it clicks. A beat. Several more clicks.) I don't get it.

DAD

I took out the bullets. Back at the Citgo.

CHARLIE

So ... this whole time, you were just ... humoring me?

(They exchange a look)

CHARLIE (Cont'd)

Right. (A beat) But ... if the gun was unloaded, why'd you let me go through that whole big dramatic thing?

DAD

I needed to see. To see if you'd actually ... pull the trigger.

CHARLIE

A test. I failed. (A beat) So then, no Aunt Margaret's, huh? "Do not pass Go, do not collect \$200, go directly to jail" ...

(A long beat)

DAD

Charlie, why the aurora? Why was that so important?

CHARLIE

It was for you, Dad. You've always wanted to see it.

DAD

I have?

CHARLIE

Sure. Don't you remember? We were watching that National Geographic special. (He does the National Geographic theme) *Ba-ba-baaah-bump*. About Alaska? It showed the auroras, and you said, "I've always wanted to see those." *Ba-ba-baaah-bump bah-bah-bah-BUMP-BUMP*. It was a Sunday.

DAD

Sunday when?

CHARLIE

1978.

DAD

Oh.

CHARLIE

June 25. Anyway, I wanted you to see it before ... I just wanted you to see it.

DAD

Well ... thank you, son.

(A beat. The air starts to sparkle and glimmer. They look up in amazement.)

CHARLIE

It's the Orionids!

DAD

The what?

CHARLIE

I-I was so caught up with the Aurora forecasts I completely forgot about the Orionids. Of course! It's only like the third best meteor shower in the Northern Hemisphere!

DAD

It's incredible. There's ... dozens ...

CHARLIE

And there's Orion - hence, "the Orionids" - he was hiding behind the trees.

DAD

Like fireworks ...

CHARLIE

Better! See it's the debris field from Haley's comet. Even though it won't be back until 2061, it's left all these tiny particles of ice and dust in its orbital path. So the earth -

DAD

Charlie?

CHARLIE

Yeah, Dad?

DAD

Don't spoil it.

CHARLIE

Right.

(They continue to gaze up, in awe, the light glowing off their faces.)