

The Good Stuff

A ring tone sounds.

*GUNTHER (old) walks backyard toward a picnic table.
Hearing the ring tone, he searches his jacket pockets. Finds
phone, cups hand to ear.*

GUNTHER

Ee-yeah?

JEAN (40's) appears from side.

JEAN

(hand cupped to cheek)

What did you say to her?

GUNTHER

Who?

JEAN

Natalie. She's changed. Like night and day. She's a different person since she saw you.

GUNTHER

I'm not following ...

JEAN

Your granddaughter, Dad. Remember? I asked you to talk to her.

GUNTHER

Natalie? When did I talk with her?

JEAN

Three days ago. Friday.

GUNTHER

I can't remember three hours ago.

JEAN

Okay, well, she was extremely depressed. To the point of despair.

GUNTHER

Natalie's too young to despair. That's the province of the old.

JEAN

Well, not wanting to live another day. I'd call that despair.

GUNTHER

Or escape.

JEAN

Whatever. I came by last week to ask for help. To speak with her, 'cause everything I tried went nowhere.

GUNTHER

(reflects)

Nattie. Little firecracker.

JEAN

That was back when she was four. She's 14 now.

GUNTHER

14 already. *(turns for flashback)* Oh, right ... you came by and ...

The light shifts to three days ago. JEAN approaches him.

JEAN

Please speak with her. All the kids call her a downer.

GUNTHER

What can I say?

JEAN

She spat on her shrink.

GUNTHER

Would you listen to me when you were that age? How do you expect me to help her?

JEAN

She looks up to you. But prepare yourself. You haven't seen her in almost two years.

JEAN turns upstage where NATALIE is about to enter.

JEAN

And don't call her Natalie. She goes by No.

GUNTHER

No?

JEAN (OS)

Yes, No.

JEAN exits.

GUNTHER

It's coming back ...

Lights up on NATALIE. Hair cut whisker short. She wears tattered jeans and a ripped black T-shirt with HELLO HELL in silver sequin letters.

GUNTHER picks up pruning shears off picnic table.

GUNTHER

... I was outside. I told her about the alien I picked up when I drove a cab.

NATALIE

The only reason I'm here is because Mom promised if I talked with you, she'd give me back my phone. Are you going to save me?

GUNTHER

No.

NATALIE

Good, cuz you'd be wasting your time.

NATALIE idly walks downstage.

GUNTHER

Your mom's worried.

NATALIE

Sure she is. I'm a problem. I don't want to live another day. And if I kill myself, she becomes this horrible, horrible parent. Her precious social life trashed.

GUNTHER

Must make you feel powerful.

NATALIE

Pfft. As if.

NATALIE watches GUNTHER crouch by seedling.

GUNTHER

You know your mother would be devastated.

NATALIE approaches GUNTHER.

NATALIE

What are you doing?

GUNTHER

This seedling needs to be pruned. See these two facing branches.

GUNTHER sets shears down. Mimics the two branches with his hands.

NATALIE

Yeah.

GUNTHER

It's called co-dominant. This joint will become a weak point as the tree grows. One of these two limbs should be cut so the tree will have a strong leader trunk.

NATALIE

Which one goes?

GUNTHER

Not sure.

NATALIE

Look the same to me.

GUNTHER

Your mom says you dropped out of school.

NATALIE

What's the point? Study history? Wake up, yo. *We're* history. Oh gee, hurry and finish your homework before extinction of the species kicks in.

GUNTHER

That's futility talking.

NATALIE

No, that's reality and it's screaming the ultimate spoiler alert.

GUNTHER mulls over the seedling. NATALIE goes to picnic table.

A pause.

NATALIE

So, talk away. Quote the bible. Say "Hang in there, kid. It's just a phase." Blah-blah-blech. I've heard it all.

GUNTHER slowly stands, turns to NATALIE.

GUNTHER

Do you ever think about reincarnation?

NATALIE

No.

GUNTHER

How 'bout transmigration of souls?

NATALIE

What? No. Why?

GUNTHER walks to picnic table.

GUNTHER

Did I ever tell you about the time I drove a cab?

NATALIE

You? An Uber driver?

GUNTHER

Not Uber. It was a shuttle. I took travelers and business people to and from the airport and their hotels.

NATALIE

Here we go. Story time.

GUNTHER looks back at seedling.

GUNTHER

Hmm.

NATALIE

Okay-okay, let's hear it.

GUNTHER

This was before you were born. I remember that cold November day clearly. Everything was gray, the sky, the buildings, the streets. I'm parked at the airport.

GUNTHER sits on a picnic table bench facing downstage.

RIDER appears. He is copper-colored. He sits on opposite bench of picnic table as if he's in the back seat of a car.

GUNTHER

Out of nowhere this strange guy appears in the back seat and says ...

RIDER

Take me to the good stuff.

GUNTHER

Take me to the good stuff. His face has a copper tint to it. Speaks with a strange accent. Foreigner. No luggage. *(checks rearview mirror)* Okay, what's your hotel? *(to NATALIE, who remains standing)* And he repeats:

RIDER

Take me to the good stuff.

GUNTHER

Sorry, I don't drive sightseers.

RIDER

You're a tour guide, yay?

GUNTHER

No. I mean I know a lot of places.

RIDER

Good places?

GUNTHER

What say I take you to your hotel. From there, you go wherever.

RIDER

Hotels are where people like to go?

GUNTHER

If they need a bed.

RIDER

No bed.

GUNTHER

Then I can't help you. Call a limo.

RIDER

Who is Alimo?

GUNTHER

That's it. We're done here. I want you to get out.

NATALIE

She-yah.

GUNTHER

"Wait," he says. And this is where things take a hairpin turn, so to speak.

RIDER

I need your help. I didn't want to come here. I was volunteered by the High Hoyle.

NATALIE

Whoa.

GUNTHER

The who?

RIDER

You don't know the High Hoyle? No, of course you don't. You're, you're here.

GUNTHER

I'm here, alright.

RIDER

The High Hoyle is a Galactic Tribunal.

NATALIE

No way.

GUNTHER

That was my reaction. But I'd driven all kinds. Drunks and stoners, call girls, politicians, drag queens. The well-heeled, the broken down. Some simply want an ear. I let them talk as long as they don't soil the seats. *(pause)* So okay, I figure this one's got a story. I check the mirror. There's an odd sheen in his eyes. I shake it off, hit the meter, pop it in drive. *(looks at rearview)* So, you say you were volunteered?

RIDER

I had no choice. You don't say "No" to the High Hoyle. Especially after they take away your travel agent license.

GUNTHER

You're a travel agent?

RIDER

For souls.

GUNTHER

A travel agent ... for souls?

RIDER

Was. They revoked my license because I failed to share a tidbit about an incarnation I was promoting. A lie of omission, I admit.

GUNTHER

I play along. And the High Hoyle?

RIDER

They summoned me.

The HIGH HOYLE advance into view. Three stone-faced figures wearing cone dog collars, each in a tunic. They may look comical, but their words and demeanor are fierce.

HIGH HOYLE (1)

We have a mission for you. Should you succeed, your license shall be reinstated.

RIDER

I have a hunch they're about to ask the impossible.

HIGH HOYLE (2)

A certain planet needs an image boost.

HIGH HOYLE (3)

It once was a blue gem, but lost its luster.

HIGH HOYLE (1)

Overcrowded.

HIGH HOYLE (2)

Under loved.

HIGH HOYLE (3)

Now so toxic and violent, the Luminous Ones are reluctant to incarnate there.

GUNTHER

Luminous Ones?

HIGH HOYLE (1)

They dread becoming absorbed by the cruelty and destructiveness on the planet.

NATALIE

No shit.

HIGH HOYLE (2)

This is a pivotal time. They are essential to counteract the diminishing life force.

RIDER

(to HIGH HOYLE)

You're saying you want me to survey a planet and find something to attract the Luminous Ones to incarnate there.

HIGH HOYLE (1)

The good stuff.

GUNTHER

I'm heading downtown, slammed in heavy traffic, trying to follow his story. The meter's running. But I'm thinking if I don't do something I may get stuck with Copperface 'til the end of my shift.

RIDER

Promoting planet incarnation for souls is tricky. You can't simply make something up and sound it out on the air waves. I did that with Shashatua and it backfired. I touted its three suns. "Imagine the beauty of three sunrises and three sunsets!" But I left out a pesky detail. Inhabitants there were suffering The Pucker Blight.

NATALIE

Shuddupp!

GUNTHER

(*plays along*)

Oh ... oh that.

RIDER

I know of one agent who assured souls that Tartigonia was the ultimate place to spend a lifetime. Ever hear of it?

GUNTHER

Nope.

RIDER

Wasteland. Lucky for the agent it was his first misstep. Otherwise he'd be battling giant crustaceans on Majujik where sulfur clouds fart.

GUNTHER

Now I'm looking for a place to pull over and kick out this space case.

RIDER

Word travels fast in the galaxy. Speed of light. You don't mess with the transmigration of souls. You must find something truly alluring, a new field of knowledge. A transcendent existence. Now, can you help me find something that will entice the luminous ones to incarnate here?

NATALIE

No.

GUNTHER

(to RIDER)

Not off the top of my head. *(to NATALIE)* I'm thinking I drop him off in the financial district for the fun of it.

HIGH HOYLE (3)

What happens here touches all shores. Without the presence of the Luminous Ones the light of the planet will darken, and the darkness will spread.

RIDER

(to HIGH HOYLE)

What kind of life are they looking for?

HIGH HOYLE (1)

They'll know it when they feel moved.

RIDER

I suddenly get this picture the other agents have failed. That the High Hoyle knows the goal is unattainable.

HIGH HOYLE (3)

Find an incentive.

The HIGH HOYLE exit.

RIDER

Right, the good stuff. All in the eyes of the beholder. So, I research. It's a young planet. Popular at one time. Things soured when the meddling began, mid-Atlantis. Building pyramids sparked attention. The Renaissance was appealing. Then, taking a closer look, I see the planet has huge oceans ...

NATALIE

Yeah, with dead zones and floating trash.

RIDER

... and a wealth of wild creatures. Enormous whales. Elephants ...

NATALIE

Slaughtered to silence.

RIDER

If those didn't move the Luminous Ones, then what? Okay, first thing, look for a tour guide. And I see you.

GUNTHER

How did to get here?

RIDER

The interstellar winds. How else?

GUNTHER

Of course. So, you came to the airport?

RIDER

Arrivals. I'm an arrival, yay?

GUNTHER

Why here of all places?

RIDER

Must be some good stuff. This is where people congregate.

GUNTHER

Yeah. It's a city.

RIDER

Please. If I don't return with the good stuff I'm doomed.

GUNTHER

Look, buddy, the good stuff for me is earning enough money to pay my bills, eat pasta, watch baseball, and make love with my wife.

NATALIE

T. M. I.

GUNTHER

I drove him to the beach. Everybody likes the beach. Even on a cold and gloomy November day. I lost the fare. Fine. Goodbye Mister Copperface.

RIDER exits. GUNTHER grabs pruning shears off table, steps downstage, murmurs something to the seedling, and snips off one of its two co-dominant branches.

NATALIE

That's your story?

GUNTHER walks back to the picnic table. RIDER returns.

GUNTHER

No. Next day I'm parked at the airport waiting for a fare, and guess who's standing there.

RIDER

Hello, my friend.

GUNTHER

Oh no, we're not doing this again.

RIDER

I don't need a ride. I'm on my way back. But I wanted to thank you for taking me to that beach. You led me straight to him.

GUNTHER

You lost me.

RIDER

The man who walks along fanning the sand with a magnetic wand.

GUNTHER

You mean a metal detector.

RIDER

I ask him what he is doing to the sand. He smiles and says, "I'm searching for what's buried. You never know what you might find. Maybe treasure, maybe tin." And it came to me— the good stuff. It is not a thing. It is not a place. It is the search itself!

A pause.

Now I'm going to declare it to the High Hoyle. This planet has the good stuff if you are willing to see what's hidden before your eyes. Often overlooked. Could be tin. Could be treasure. Yay? New awareness comes in the wonder of the search. The good stuff. Can you find it?

GUNTHER

Ah. Yeah, well good luck with that buddy.

RIDER exits.

NATALIE

That's it?

GUNTHER

Never saw him again.

GUNTHER picks up garden hose.

NATALIE
(*scoffs*)

So much for the Luminous Ones.

GUNTHER

Actually, no. They came.

NATALIE

No way.

GUNTHER

You're here, aren't you?

NATALIE straightens. GUNTHER hands her the garden hose and walks upstage. She stares at the nozzle of the hose in her hand, semi-stunned.

NATALIE

Where you going?

GUNTHER

To turn on the water.

NATALIE ambles downstage, aims hose nozzle over seedling. She calls to GUNTHER as house lights dim.

NATALIE

What kind of tree is this?

END