

SKYLAB

a one-act play

by

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CAST OF CHARACTERS:

JAY -- an eleven year-old boy, wise beyond his years.

D.J. -- over the radio (pre-recorded)

SETTING: July, 1979

PLACE: Jay's bedroom

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(AT RISE: July, 1979.)

(The bedroom of a young boy. There is a stack of books and magazines next to the bed, as well as a portable radio and desktop tape recorder. A crucifix hangs on the wall. The mattress of the bed is lifted up with a baseball bat, making a fort-like structure.)

(JAY, an 11 year-old boy, sits on the bed's box spring, wearing a yellow construction hard hat. He peers out of the cushy fort to the heavens above.)

JAY

Shhh. What was that?

(listens)

Shhh. Listen! There! That!

(JAY holds a long beat of silence. There is nothing.)

JAY

I thought I heard something. I hear lots of things these days. You can't be too careful when there are space crafts falling out of the sky. No. It's true. Space crafts are falling out of the sky.

(JAY picks up a magazine.)

JAY

It's been all over the T.V., in newspapers and magazines. Here. I read this in my dad's copy of Time.

(reading)

'It was the pride of the U.S. space program, the largest and most sophisticated vehicle ever sent into orbit. Circling the earth every ninety minutes, but lately the eighty-five ton Skylab has been in trouble. Unoccupied since 1974, Skylab has been losing altitude much more rapidly than expected, a change threatening it with incineration in the earth's atmosphere... Skylab will expire in a meteorite-like death that could scatter parts of the space station on populated regions. Space officials cannot tell precisely when the random reentry -- as NASA jargon has it -- will occur. One-third of the station will rain down in a shower of some five hundred fragments.'

(JAY stops reading and looks up.)

JAY

Five...hundred... fragments -- chunks of big hot metal -- just falling out of the sky. As my dad would say, 'That's our government at work, folks.' According to anchorman Frank Reynolds of ABC News, the Skylab is supposed to drop any day now. No control. No warning. No nothing. You could be leaving the city library with a really good book and BOOM! Or coming out of Eyerly's Department Store after riding that cool elevator and BOOM! Just like that. Or leaving G.C. Murphy's after buying some Laffy Taffy and BOOM! Just like that. You're gone. It could land on you. Or you. Or you. Or even worse... me. I haven't been outside all summer. Maybe a few seconds here and there. But mostly, I just stay up here in this stinky room, inside my fort, listening to the radio.

(JAY motions to a small radio.)

JAY

We talked about Skylab in school before we got out for the summer. I told Jimmy Labutka that I was kinda scared that Skylab would fall on me. And he said, 'What makes you think you're so special that Skylab would fall on you?' And then he laughed. People are treating this like a big joke. Jimmy's older sister, Tina, was even having a Skylab Party on the 4th of July. I don't know what they did, but they should've been on their knees praying for mercy. My dad said the guys at his construction site were placing bets on when and where it's going to land. And I heard that downtown at People's Drug Store, they have all these buttons and T-shirts saying 'Skylab '79.' Like it's some big meteor Rock concert or something. What the heck is wrong with people? They're even playing jokey songs on the radio about it. Oh, that reminds me--

(JAY picks up a portable radio and turns up the volume.)

JAY

I've been waiting all day for them to play my request. I called about a hundred times this morning. Shhhhh. They're changing songs.

(JAY grabs a desktop tape recorder and puts it up to the radio's speaker.)

D.J. (OVER RADIO)

It's a hot July day out there today as we wait for Skylab to plummet to the Earth. Look out! The Skylab is falling!

(SFX: Of a mission dropping and explosion.)

(JAY rolls his eyes.)

D.J. (OVER RADIO)

While we're all still here waiting, let's cool off with some cool tunes.

JAY

This is my request. I know it.

(JAY presses the record and play buttons on the tape recorder.)

JAY

(to audience)

Shhh. I'm taping.

D.J. (OVER RADIO)

This one goes out to a little boy who has been calling all morning...

(JAY nods in anticipation.)

D.J. (OVER RADIO)

Vinnie, this is for you!

(Billy Joel's "My Life" begins to play. JAY clicks off the tape recorder and turns down the radio.)

JAY

Not me. Oh well.

(a beat)

I know what you're thinking. Why bother taping a song? Why read the newspaper? Why even get up in the morning? If at any moment, you could be dead. I know. I think about that all the time.

(a beat)

I wonder if that song was for Vinnie Dellmasonto. He's my arch nemesis. Vinnie has been mean to me since our first day of school together. First off, he's always seated behind me. Carruthers, Dellmasonto. Can't those nuns find any way to seat kids other than alphabetical order? Vinnie's always kicking my chair or looping his pencil into the frays on the back of my sweater. Then on the playground, he constantly teases me because I'm no good at sports. I mean, I watch football games with my dad. How else will I learn how to cuss? But in real life, something just doesn't work. In football -- I close my eyes when the ball comes hurling towards me. In baseball -- I close my eyes when the ball comes hurling towards me. In ping-pong -- I close my eyes when the ball

(MORE)

JAY (CONT'D)

comes hurling towards me. But the worse is gym class. Every Thursday morning, Monsignor Richter comes over to teach the boys 'The Christian Fundamentals of Human Sportsmanship.' For me, it's really 'The Christian Fundamentals of Humiliation.' All Monsignor does is wear gym shorts and his Notre Dame sweatshirt, blow his whistle and pick the two best athletes to be team captains for a game of kick ball. They're usually Vinnie and Troy Williamson -- who are the class jocks and also happen to be altar boys. The captains pick their team members one by one and either me or Tommy Sowerson are the last ones standing. Well, I'm standing. Tommy's in a wheelchair. And they always say it the same way. 'I guess I'll take Jay.' As if there was a choice between me and a tater tot, they'd choose the tater tot. From there, we play a cut-throat game of kick ball while Monsignor sits on the curb, smokes a cigarette and reads the morning Times. There's no mention about teamwork. No talk about Christian sportsmanship. Not even one word if Jesus even liked sports. Although I imagine he was bad at them, wearing sandals and being Jewish. When it's my turn, I step up to the plate and kick an easy out for my team. Vinnie usually yells, 'Thanks a lot, Jay.' His tone depends on which team I happen to be on -- his or Troy's.

(appreciative)

'Thanks a lot, Jay.' Or...

(sarcastic)

'Thanks a lot Jay.'

(thinks about it)

Yeah, I'm pretty sure Jesus would've kicked an easy out too.

(a beat)

I have a little confession to make. There's part of me that kinda wishes the Skylab would fall on Vinnie Dellmasonto. Not his house, because Mr. and Mrs. Dellmasonto and his little sister Francesca are pretty nice. But maybe when he's outside stealing a pack of Hubba Bubba gum from some little kid. And then, out of nowhere -- BOOM! Just like that. No more Vinnie Dellmasonto. I know. I shouldn't even have those thoughts because it'll guarantee that the Skylab will drop on me. Because that's what God does. He loves His irony.

(JAY picks up a small book beside his bed. He flips through it.)

JAY

That is irony, isn't it? I learned all those terms in Sister Roberta's English literature class. Which I did really well in.

(JAY find the spot in the book.)

JAY

Here.

(reading)

'Irony. Noun. One. A figure of speech; emphasis by stating the opposite; sarcasm.

Two. The frustration of hopes.'

(brings down the book)

The frustration of hopes. Yeah, that's pretty much it.

(JAY holds up the book.)

JAY

I have another confession to make. I stole this book from Sister Roberta. You all must think I'm evil -- hoping my arch nemesis gets hit by an out-of-control space craft and now stealing books from really old nuns. I even wrote in it. In pen. See.

(shows the inside of the book to audience)

And you know, in Catholic School, if you write in a book, it's a fate worse than death. I just really wanted to keep the book for the summer. I don't know. It makes me feel smart reading it. Here. Listen to some of these words...

(opens book; reads)

Hy-per-bole. Ek-phras-tic. De-noue-ment. See. Don't you feel smart already? They also sound kinda dirty.

(reading)

Assonance. Diction. Onomatopoeia.

(JAY puts down the book.)

JAY

So I came up with this great plan how to steal this book. On the last day of school, we all stripped our books of their brown homemade book covers -- created from brown paper bags from the A&P -- and piled them next to Sister's desk, as she checked off our names in her ledger. I got in line, but before putting my book on the pile, I asked Sister, with all the sincerity I could muster... Muster -- that's another good word! I said...

(over-acting)

'Gosh, Sister, there are a lot of books here. Gee, Sister, do you need help moving these books back to the storage room after school?'

(done acting)

Sister Roberta looked at me suspiciously, as any smart nun does when a child volunteers to do any good deed. For being religious, they sure don't trust people. So Sister looked down at me over her glasses and said, 'Yes, Jay. I'd like that.' After school, I reported to Sister's classroom and helped her move her books to the storage cabinet. And when

(MORE)

JAY (CONT'D)

she turned her back, I slipped a book into my bookbag. Sister was none-the-wiser.

(realizes he made a joke)

Nun-the-wiser.

(chuckles to himself)

That's funny... Sure, it may have been wrong, but I finally proved, once and for all, that nuns don't have eyes in the back of their heads.

(JAY hears something.)

JAY

Shhh. Did you hear that?

(JAY listens. Nothing.)

JAY

For a minute, I thought... Never mind.

(a beat)

The nuns at school tell us that we shouldn't be afraid to die. And if we fear death then there is something wrong with us -- spiritually. Some secret sin that is stopping us from wanting to go to heaven. Then I think about last November when Sister Mary Stella got really sick. She had sugar and the doctors had to remove her toes. Then, her foot. And eventually her leg up to her knee. Jimmy Labutka secretly called her Sister Mary Stumpy. And then Sister Mary Stella got really, really sick and was put in the Catholic hospital on the hill. And those same nuns who told us in religion class to welcome death were suddenly so scared that Sister Mary Stella was going to die. Every morning in the prayers over the intercom, they'd ask for a special intention for Sister. During the day, the nuns would huddle up in the hallways, like football players working out a special prayer tackle. They'd hold one another, pray and even cry. Which made me think only one thing -- what in the heck kind of sin did Sister Mary Stella commit? It had to be a doozie if they didn't want her to die. I mean, if you're a nun or a priest, you should get a special pass to cut any line in the after-life and go straight into heaven. Do not pass Go. Do not collect two hundred dollars.

(acting like a maitre d')

'Hello, Sister -- right this way. We've been waiting for you. You look nice. Is that a new habit?' Sister Mary Stella got better and was sent to Louisville. The nuns were so relieved. These are the same people who told us not to be afraid of death. Are they just big hypocrites? Or underneath all that black cloth, are they just scared human beings? Like all of us. Like me.

(JAY looks at the crucifix.)

JAY

At school, they take us to mass twice a week and we say those words in the Apostle's Creed, 'We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.' But during that part, I don't say it. I just stop talking. You see, I don't know if I believe in a 'world to come.' I mean really, really believe it. I just don't know. Maybe that's my big secret sin.

(JAY grabs another book.)

JAY

Some of the boys in school were passing around a book at the end of the year. No, not Judy Blume's 'Forever.' Only the girls passed that book around until Connie Tilman's mother found it in her sock drawer and blew the whistle on that sting operation. I used to think what's the big deal? They're just words in a book. Words can't hurt you. That's until Matt Mattatoski brought in a copy of this...

(holds up book)

'The Predictions of Nostradamus.' Have you heard of this guy? He was a fortune teller. Or a prophet. Or just a really good guesser. He lived in the 1500s and made all these predictions that have come true. Like the invention of the airplane, the submarine, the assassination of the Kennedy brothers. Some people are saying he even predicted the fall of the Skylab. Matt passed the book to me and it affected me more than any dirty Judy Blume book could. This guy predicts all these horrible things, including World War III, which is coming in 1986. Only seven short years from now. I know you think he's probably just some crazy guy in a funky hat, but this will happen. Russia hates us. We hate them. We'll never be friends. Everyone's got a bomb. The end is coming. I know it.

(There is a change in songs on the radio. JAY grabs his tape recorder.)

JAY

They're changing songs again. Shhh.

(JAY listens.)

JAY

Just a commercial break.

(JAY puts down the tape recorder.)

JAY

What time is it? Almost time for my dad to get home. He comes home every day at 4:20. Right before he does, I take off my hard hat, tear down my fort and run downstairs to start dinner. It's Wednesday, so that means London broil. I'll poke it with a fork and pour salad dressing on it and then broil it on both sides. But not too long. My dad likes his meat bloody. And right before he pulls in, I'll run outside -- for just a second -- and put my bike in the driveway to block his truck from getting into the garage. This way, he'll yell for me to put my bike away and think I was out all day -- playing. And everything will feel normal. For a little while anyway. Not that death may come at any second.

D.J. (OVER RADIO)

This just in from U.P.I.

(JAY crosses and turns up the radio.)

D.J. (OVER RADIO)

Yes, it's over, folks. A little while ago, the Skylab landed in Western Australia. Early word is that it fell on a secluded farm after the majority of it broke up over the Indian Ocean. No casualties have been reported, thus far. Time to celebrate!

(JAY turns down the radio.)

JAY

Australia.

(JAY stands -- not really knowing what to do.)

JAY

(unemotional)

It's over. Just like that.

(JAY looks back at his fort.)

JAY

I won't need this anymore.

(JAY starts to slowly dismantle the fort.)

JAY

I guess Jimmy Labutka was right. Why would the Skylab hit me? I'm nothing special. I'm just a kid who steals books from old nuns and tapes songs off the radio. And enjoys riding the elevator at Eyerly's Department Store.

(JAY sits on the bed and takes off his hard hat. A long beat of silence. Then:)

JAY

The last time I rode that elevator was last year. She and I went to Eyerly's that Wednesday morning to get me a new pair of shorts. Then we stopped by Murphy's to get some taffy before going to the library. She always took me to the library in the summer and let me get one book a week. We just spent our days together laughing and having a good time. No cares. That afternoon, she had forgotten something for dinner. A can of green beans, I think. I really can't remember. She came into the TV room and asked, 'Do you want to come with me to the store?' I said, 'No.' She told me she'd be right back and she left. At 4:20, my Dad came home and asked me, 'Where's your mother?' I told him she had gone to the store and would be right back. The London broil was already done and on the table. So we sat in front of it, waiting. An hour. Then two. Dad got up and paced and smoked and talked to himself. I asked if I should pour the milk and he said, 'No.' I remember the kitchen clock ticking louder than I ever heard it before. There are times in your life when you know -- you just know -- that something bad is going to happen. But then we heard the car pull into the driveway. This relief came over me. Dad went to the door and I got up and started pouring the milk, waiting to hear her explanation. She ran into Mrs. Richmond who can just talk and talk and talk. Or she couldn't find Green Giant green beans so she had to drive all the way up to the Safeway. We'd all laugh about it. Ho-ho-ho. Green Giant. But it wasn't her at the door. It was a state trooper. Mom's car had been hit by a truck on her way out of the A&P parking lot. She was dead. Boom. Just like that.

(sits in silence a moment, then:)

When I went back to school after that summer, the nuns tried to be comforting. They kept telling me that my mom was a good Catholic and in a better place. How do they know? What does that even mean? All I knew is that we weren't together. How could anywhere else be better?

(a beat)

I never told my Dad that she asked me to go with her that day. I've never told anyone. I could have been in that car with her and I didn't go. She went on to this 'better place' and I'm still here. And now, somehow today, I've escaped death again. Until, I guess, World War III comes in seven years. And I'll be at the age to be drafted.

(a beat)

My Mom never knew about the Skylab. I sometimes wonder what she would've said. She would have laughed about it I guess. 'Oh, Jay. Don't worry about that. Go outside and play and let the stink blow off you.' Maybe I should go out and play. Maybe that's all I can do. Maybe that's all any of us can do. Go outside. Play. Work. Do whatever. Just live our lives and wait for the next big thing to fall from the sky.

D.J. (OVER RADIO)

And here's a request going out to a little boy named Jay.

(Supertramp's "The Logical Song" from 1979 plays over the radio.)

(JAY reaches for the tape recorder, but then stops. Instead, he just listens to the song. As it plays, JAY slowly looks up to the heavens.)

(LIGHTS OUT.)

-END OF PLAY-