

Stars and Barmen

A comedy about getting lucky in space-time

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sample- opening scenes of play only

Rupert: Male, late 20s. PhD student in astrophysics. Geek on the make.

Elaine: Female, late 20s. Memoirist with something to prove.

Claire: Female, late 20s, early 30s. A poet. Serene.

“What I prophesied two and twenty years ago... what sixteen years ago I urged as a thing to be sought... that for which I joined Tycho Brahe, for which I settled in Prague, for which I have devoted the best part of my life to astronomical contemplations, at length I have brought to light and have recognized its truth beyond my most sanguine expectations... It is now eighteen months since I got the first glimpse of light, three months since the dawn, very few days since the unveiled sun, most admirable to gaze on, burst out upon me. If you forgive me, I rejoice ; if you are angry, I can bear it. The die is cast; the book is written, to be read either now or by posterity, I care not which. It may well wait a century for a reader, as God has waited six thousand years for an observer.”

-Johannes Kepler, on discovering his laws of

planetary motion

"Tonight's gonna be a good night."

-“I Gotta Feeling,” the Black Eyed Peas

ELAINE

(in voice-over)

So there's this girl I read about, that says she fell in love with a star? I think it was a metaphor. She said she went up into the sky forever and he hurt her so badly that she forgot how to come back to earth. And like, all I can think is... where do I go to meet someone like *that*? Like, what party is *that* guy at, I mean...

Music drowns her voice- an overplayed but still irresistible recent dance-floor anthem along the lines of "I Gotta Feeling" by the Black Eyed Peas. The sound goes muffled, as if we're hearing it from outside the party, and Rupert enters. He is dressed in decent pants, a t-shirt with an understated joke, and a suit jacket- the uniform of a geek who isn't sure where he's going tonight. He jogs up and addresses the audience, as if the audience is an attractive girl.

RUPERT

Hey, so. Great party. Cute couple, right? Extremely cute. So, do you need a light, or did you just come out here because you hate this song as much as I do? Yeah, I'm not a smoker, either.

He takes out a package of cigarettes and puts one in his mouth.

These are candy. My name is Rupert, by the way. I'm an astrophysicist. It's nice to meet you too. You pull off the dress really well, considering. Can I ask you a question?

He takes a smartphone out of his pocket.

Would you be at all interested in having your picture taken as part of a comparative survey of...

Ok.

He sighs, makes a note in his smartphone, and then takes a jog, describing a small circle. The music changes, into cool and understated cocktail party jazz. Rupert completes his circle, and once again addresses the audience. He has somehow acquired a small plate of appetizers.

RUPERT

Hey. Wow. HEY. Great party. I feel outdressed by the crudites. I am Rupert, by the way. I'm an astrophysicist. I'm in the business of identifying large, bright and interesting objects. I had to inspect you more closely. I'm not saying you're large. You're very proportionate. And shiny. It's fascinating. So I take it you're involved in earthquake relief? Cool. Excellent. Inspiring. Listen, I'd really love to take your picture. It's for sort of a project. A comparative survey of women I'm attracted to at parties. Yes, that does sound slightly strange. I can be slightly strange, fair enough. Would you like a candy cigarette? They're totally legal.

Ok.

Rupert makes a note in his smartphone, and jogs off in another small circle. The music switches to glimmering tween-friendly pop- Katy Perry, perhaps. He runs up to the audience with a plastic cup, and toasts.

RUPERT

L'Chaim! To Rebecca on the day of her womanhood. I mean, Rachel. Thank you! She looks very mature. Not that I care about that. I'm here for the older cousins, and maybe even some of the cool aunts. I am very open to cool aunts. *(he takes out his smartphone)* Listen, do you mind if I..

The Katy Perry song ends. The dance-floor anthem from the top of the show begins. Rupert blinks.

RUPERT

Have you noticed that everyone plays this song kind of a lot? I mean, I can't stand it, but everyone-

He watches the woman move away from him.

else loves dancing to it.

Ok.

Rupert makes a note and takes a walk. The music changes to some sort of muted trancey indie electro stuff. Rupert stares at something large and unusual.

RUPERT

What *is* that? I mean, it's a 20-foot Pentakis dodecahedron made out of tinfoil, but what's it doing at a party? Is it trying to say "Listen, this party is way beyond you. You do not understand this party. You could be having a transcendent experience here if you weren't a total and complete imposter." Not that you look like an imposter, you look very appropriate. Appropriate, yet approachable. You have one of those faces. You know, one of those faces where probably crazy people just start conversations with you on the bus out of nowhere? Yeah. Well, it's been nice talking to you. Excuse me.

Rupert, shaking his head violently, makes another note in his smart phone and circles-

RUPERT

So, yeah, um-

The music stops. There is a silence, or maybe just an icy metallic vibration in the air. There is a woman standing behind Rupert. Throughout the conversation, she remains behind Rupert, and he speaks out as if he is speaking to her.

RUPERT

Wow.

The woman smiles.

RUPERT

I didn't see you.

CLAIRE

Were you looking for me?

RUPERT

Absolutely. Can I take your picture... it's for a... never mind. Can I take your picture?

CLAIRE

You can try. I'm not very photogenic.

RUPERT

I'm having a lot of trouble getting you into focus. My phone-

CLAIRE

I thought it was a camera.

RUPERT

Oh, it does everything.

He takes a picture, frowns at the result, keeps trying under the following dialogue.

This place is wiggling me out. The carpet is so white. You know what I mean. You're the only other person here who's human. Which is not to say you're not beautiful. You're extremely beautiful. It just doesn't seem like you belong here.

CLAIRE

That's because I'm not here.

RUPERT

What?

CLAIRE

I'm somewhere else entirely.

RUPERT

Are you at a different party? Are you at a better party?

CLAIRE

It's not a party. It's an orrery.

But no-one knows what an orrery is.

RUPERT

An orrery? A mechanical model of the solar system? You're right, no-one does know what that is.

CLAIRE

Oh. Well. Shit. I thought it was a mechanical model of the galaxy.

RUPERT

No, that'd be unworkable. The stars are just too far apart. Very 18th century, orreries- nowadays we just use computers.

CLAIRE

We?

RUPERT

I'm an astrophysicist. Student. Phd.

CLAIRE

Are you? I'm a poet.

RUPERT

A poet. Why can't I ever go to a party and meet a nice lady CFO?

CLAIRE

Who invited you to this?

RUPERT

Ok. Don't rat me out. Some nights I just leave the computer running numbers and follow the lights, you know? I mean,, it's Friday- I can't just sit in my office all night chugging coffee and waiting for the stars to align. As a scientist, I feel the need to study these strange things, these parties, but if this is a mechanical model of the solar system how am I going to get a drink?

CLAIRE

Of the galaxy. Here.

From behind, she hands him her drink. He takes it.

RUPERT

Wowee.. (*referring to the drink*) Floats like a Cristal, stings like a scotch.

CLAIRE

Finish it. I've just realized I can't afford to get any drunker. I'm avoiding somebody.

RUPERT

Is it me?

Claire laughs. There is a sound of bells.

CLAIRE

No. My ex.

RUPERT

Your idiot ex?

CLAIRE

I wouldn't call him that.

RUPERT

Anyone who wasn't an idiot would make sure he kept you forever.

CLAIRE

Some things are inevitable.

RUPERT

Like by the end of this party a red drink goes on the white carpet, or in five billion years the sun collapses into a white dwarf. That's inevitable. But this thing with you? (*He shakes his head.*) I think I could avoid it.

CLAIRE

Are you trying to pick me up?

RUPERT

If it's working yes. If not, no. It's a quantum pickup. Sorry. Science joke. Bad one. Is it working?

Bells again. The bells get louder and more frequent over the following dialogue.

CLAIRE

Do you hear that?

RUPERT

Not the joke, I mean. The pick-up. Am I being too subtle? Cause I can always intensify. Hey baby, what's your sign? Ha. No. I'm sorry. I mean, what's your name?

CLAIRE

It's Claire. Do you hear bells?

RUPERT

Claire. Everything's under control. (*He takes out his smart phone. The bells intensify.*)

CLAIRE

The bells! Is that your phone?

RUPERT

Oh yeah. I'm not gonna answer it right now. Just give me a second to-

The bells are really going crazy. Rupert stares at his phone in dismay.

RUPERT

Oh shit. I have to take this.

He gives the drink back to Claire.

It's the universe.

Blackout.

Scene II

Rupert is in his office, lying on the floor, fiddling with his smartphone. There are computers, clutter, nothing particularly glamorous, no windows. Periodically, something beeps.

RUPERT

I know.

It beeps again.

RUPERT

I know, right? 74 degrees at 11pm. It's an absolutely boggling June night. My mind is turned to-

Beep.

RUPERT

It's very biological. I'm 27, you know. I have imperatives.

Beep.

RUPERT

Yes, you have imperatives too. But for you, this room fulfills them. For me, well-

Beep.

RUPERT

Fine. Be that way. I called, just like I promised.

There is a pause. Rupert continues to commune with his smartphone. Beep.

RUPERT

Craigslist.

Beep.

RUPERT

Missed Connections.

Beep.

RUPERT

Yes, her. Look, you can't just post once, and then give up. You have to try different key words

Beep.

RUPERT

She's an excellent prospect, and she liked me, and if I hadn't had to coordinate two telescopes from the middle of the frickin' party at that exact moment I would have gotten her number.

Beep.

RUPERT

I am NOT fixated. Look, I'm posting on Casual Encounters too. Pursuing dual lines of inquiry.

Beep.

RUPERT

I thought someone might like to come by the office for like a little late night quote unquote stargazing.

Beep. Beep.

RUPERT

A woman would so totally do that. Maybe. Potentially. Look, we all understand it's a long shot, but how many normal spectra do you process on a nightly basis, looking for anomalies? I mean-

Beep.

RUPERT

As a matter of fact, Mandy, I have gotten 17 replies.

Beep.

RUPERT

Ten spambots, three hookers, one admitted dude, and three remaining hits who could either be unadmitted dudes, or flakes, or maybe... just maybe... the proverbial stellar hydrogen reignition.

Rupert checks an email on his phone.

Oh, never mind. This one's a hooker too. Why did it take so many emails to find that out?

If there were only more women in the hard sciences. It's a sad fact, Mandy. I'm not being sexist. I wish it were otherwise. But the numbers are just brutal.

Beep.

RUPERT

What if I started doing outreach-like, breeding the hot cosmologists of tomorrow? Not in a pedo way. I mean- if I went into high schools- 16 and 27 is no good, but what about 25 and 36? Ok, that's marginal. 36 and 47? Ok, that's totally awesome. I'll get laid when I'm tenured. By then I'll be dead.

Beep.

RUPERT

Forget the future. Simplify. I only have two problems. One. Find a female of some kind to take to my sister's wedding. Two, get laid sometime before my scrotum explodes from loneliness, which could honestly be in the next twenty minutes.

Ok. How does this sound?

(reading directly from his iphone)

Astrophysicist seeks poet. Parentheses, at the other party, end parentheses. Your name was Claire. You didn't ask mine. We talked about 17th century astronomical devices and longing. I would have asked for your number, and probably your hand in marriage, but I got a call from a stellar event that I had to deal with. For god's sake write.

Beep.

RUPERT

Whatever. It's gold. I'm posting it.

There is a knock at the door. Rupert looks up.

Another knock.

ELAINE
(through the door)

Hello? Is anyone in there?

RUPERT
Hello. Massive Anomalous Novae Data Survey, Rupert Knox speaking. Can I help you?

ELAINE
It's Elaine. *(long pause.)* From Craigslist?

RUPERT
You have got to be kidding me, oh my god.

He scans emails on his smart phone.

RUPERT
Oh, my god. Hang on a sec!

ELAINE
(outside)
Sure.

Beep.

RUPERT
I know, right? Oh, MY god.

He bends down and looks at himself in the reflective surface of a screen.

RUPERT
Shit. Physics hair.

He tries to do something about it.

ELAINE
Can I come in, please? What if someone walks by?

RUPERT
Shit. *(Louder)* Yeah, sure, fine. *(He swoops his hands desperately through his hair, then leans against the table, affecting cool.)* Door's not locked.

Elaine enters. She's in her late 20s, dressed in jeans, carrying a bag, uncomfortable.

ELAINE

Rupert, right? (*he nods.*) You're cuter than I thought you'd be.

RUPERT

Thanks? Actually, so are you. But I was pretty sure you were a man.

ELAINE

No. The picture was real.

RUPERT

I liked the picture. Very nice.. camera angle. Very real. You are really and completely real.

Beep.

ELAINE

How old are you? I thought you were supposed to be some kind of a scientist.

RUPERT

Astrophysicist. Student. PhD.

ELAINE

You're in grad school?

RUPERT

Is that a problem? I've never really done this, or anything like this. I mean, I've done things that are like this- I'm not a virgin, obviously. Erm. Have you? Done anything like this?

ELAINE

What do you think?

RUPERT

Why don't I give you a tour of the lab? Would that be interesting? Or maybe you are looking for something more-animalistic. Cause if you want to be thrown against a desk and taken violently by a stranger- maybe we can talk... get to know each other, and then you can go outside and come back in and just pretend we're strangers.

ELAINE

It's not about what I want. It's about what you want.

RUPERT

Let's take a tour of the lab then.

Desperate pause. Beep.

RUPERT

Well. These are the computers. And this is my chair. Um. This is the wall where we post comics we've printed out from the internet. There's not a lot, is there?

ELAINE

No, not really. Does something keep beeping?

RUPERT

Yes. Mandy is beeping.

ELAINE

Is Mandy your computer?

RUPERT

Mandy is IN my computer. She's a program. Massive Anomalous Nova Data SurveYYYYYYY-yuh. The truth is there's nothing I can actually show you. In an ideal world I'd say- ah, here is the glorious night sky which we scan for novae ... except we're in the middle of this giant city and our campus telescope is for shit. I mean for undergraduates. All I have is a data feed from Gulliver, which is an ultra-violet detector in in low-earth orbit, which means that Mandy gets a lot of numbers that used to be electromagnetic radiation and turns them into beeps.

Beep.

ELAINE

What does that mean?

RUPERT

It means this radiation is boring. If she finds something that isn't boring she beeps differently, and then I look at it, and I generally decide it is boring after all.

ELAINE

What if it's not?

RUPERT

Then it's a burper, and I have to make some calls to men in telescopes.

ELAINE

Men in telescopes?

RUPERT

Usually men, yes. It's a problem on a lot of levels. Would you say this space is hostile to you as a female?

ELAINE

I don't know.

RUPERT

We're trying to figure out what we're doing wrong. You're actually here as part of an outreach program to get more women into the lab.

ELAINE

Well. You've got one here now. What are you going to do with her?

RUPERT

You seem hostile.

ELAINE

I'm just trying to figure out what you want.

RUPERT

You still seem hostile. You seem hostile even though what you're actually doing is unbuttoning your shirt, which is not often viewed as an act of aggression.

ELAINE

Is it working?

RUPERT

That depends on whether you're trying to arouse me or intimidate me. Yes.

She stands in front of him, accessible.

Those are really here, really now.

Pause.

Could you put them away please?

ELAINE

Seriously?

RUPERT

I just need a little more lead-up.. or....

ELAINE

Do you not like me?

RUPERT

No. No. You're perfect. You're amazing. I just happen to be one of those guys who needs to talk a little.

ELAINE

You need to talk.

RUPERT

I need to have a conversation.

ELAINE

Ok. I can do that. Let's have a conversation.

So. You study exploding stars.

RUPERT

I don't study exploding stars.

Elaine is at a loss.

RUPERT

Those are supernovas. What I'm studying is really more... burping stars. They get brighter for a while, but there aren't really any permanent consequences vis a vis exploding. I mean, sure, I'd rather work on something a little more cutting edge, but, you know, a lot of the most important discoveries have been made by people doing comprehensive surveys of really incredibly boring shit.

Pause..

ELAINE

(suddenly)

I know the constellations.

RUPERT

That's cool.

ELAINE

I had one of those books. You know. Stories of the Night Sky. It had the Greek stories, and the pictures, but it also had charts, and it would tell you what the constellations really are...like... here is valiant Hercules, placed in the night sky for his awesomeness, but his shoulder is actually made of a 3 billion year old ball of gas.

RUPERT

No.

It's more like 370 million. And it's a binary system. From this distance they kind of blur together.

ELAINE

Oh. You're kind of a dick, aren't you?

RUPERT

That's why I don't get laid.

So what do you have to do, to become a star? I meant in the classical sense. What are the requirements for stellification? Does a god have to want to bone you, or something? Cause that's mostly what I remember from mythology. God wants to bone you,, another god turns you into a duck. Boom. Stars.

ELAINE

I dunno. It really varies. Cassiopeia was put among the stars for bragging too much. That always pissed me off. Like, you act like a heinous bitch, and instead of being punished you get to shine up in the sky where everyone can see you, and you get to live forever.

RUPERT

Maybe it is a punishment. Maybe it's cold up there, or lonely. Maybe they want to go back.

ELAINE

So what does a star have to do to become a person?

RUPERT

Oh, they've already done it. You know, we're all made of stars.

ELAINE

I thought that was hippie bullshit.

RUPERT

Hard clean science. The universe used to be nothing but hydrogen and helium and like a scotch of lithium. Everything higher-order had to be cooked up inside a star's heart, Oxygen, carbon... all those elements we love so much. My hand used to be inside a star.. this chair... your shirt....

ELAINE

And what did the star have to do, to become your hand?

RUPERT

Explode.

ELAINE

Oh. I see. Did *my* hand use to be inside a star?

RUPERT

Yeah. Your hand too.

ELAINE

And my elbow?

RUPERT

Yep. Inside a star. Your eyes... your hair... your teeth...

My shoulder? ELAINE

Let me check. Yes. Yes. Definitely that also. RUPERT

And this? ELAINE

Mmmhmmm. RUPERT

And this? ELAINE

Yes. RUPERT

And this? ELAINE

Oh. Yes. Yes. Definitely. I'm an expert. RUPERT

After a moment-

Worth the money, huh? ELAINE
(dreamily)

Mmmmmm what money? RUPERT

You know, the money. ELAINE

The money? RUPERT

Yeah. The money. ELAINE

Whose money? RUPERT

ELAINE

Yours. The money that *you* are going to give to *me*.

RUPERT

The.... um....

Ok. There has been a huge misunderstanding here.

ELAINE

Misunderstanding?

RUPERT

I'm sure you're a very hardworking person, but no. No. First of all, I'm in grad school, but even if my funding weren't kind of shitty, I do not want a hooker.

ELAINE

Then why did you email a hooker?

RUPERT

I did not email a hooker. I emailed a woman who was interested in coming into my office during the night shift for some kind of sexual encounter, free of charge.

ELAINE

Are you fucking kidding me?

RUPERT

You can ask any of the other hookers who emailed me and were a little more upfront about what they wanted. Rupert Knox is not interested in paying for it.

ELAINE

You said you would give me the stars.

RUPERT

Yeah?

ELAINE

And I said how many stars, and you said 300 stars.

RUPERT

I was trying to flirt. Also- 300?

ELAINE

What?

RUPERT

That is a ridiculous amount of money.

ELAINE

It's better than the going rate.

RUPERT

Well I guess you would know.

ELAINE

Fine. \$250.

RUPERT

This is not a price thing, this is a principal thing. I'm very sorry that you wasted your time, but I think we should maybe just terminate this whole process now.

ELAINE

Don't you want to have sex with me?

RUPERT

Theoretically yes.

ELAINE

So make an offer.

RUPERT

No.

ELAINE

Obviously, you wanted to get laid tonight. Obviously, I'm an acceptable fuck. So obviously, fucking me must be worth something to you. How much? \$200? \$175?

RUPERT

Listen. I don't have the money. I don't have the money on a PHILOSOPHICAL level. If I wanted to have sex for money, I wouldn't be getting a Phd in Astrophysics.

ELAINE

150?

RUPERT

No!

ELAINE

\$100?

RUPERT

I'll give you \$20 to go away.

ELAINE

Fuck you. 50.

RUPERT

No.

ELAINE

25.

RUPERT

You must be joking.

ELAINE

You seriously wouldn't pay \$25 to fuck me? I thought scientists were supposed to be practical.

RUPERT

First, you're thinking of engineers. Engineers are practical. Scientists are just smart enough to realize that a hooker who is willing to drop down to \$25 is playing some kind of game that we shouldn't play. I don't know why you're here, but I'd really like you to go. Or I'm going to have to call the police.

ELAINE

Soliciting a prostitute is a crime.

RUPERT

I didn't solicit, you solicited. Also I don't think you're really a prostitute.

ELAINE

What do you mean?

RUPERT

You just don't look like a prostitute.

ELAINE

What does a prostitute look like?
What do *I* look like?

RUPERT

Honestly? A grad student.

ELAINE

You don't think I'm hot enough to be a hooker. What do you know? You give me money for sex, I'm a hooker. That's the only qualification I need.

RUPERT

I am not giving you money for sex. I'm kind of souring on the prospect of having sex

with you for free.

ELAINE

You're an asshole, did you know that? I thought you were an astrophysicist, but you're really a ..a...a...

Elaine grabs her bag and leaves, slamming the door. Rupert stands, silent, for a long moment.

Beep.

RUPERT

I know, right?