

TILL THE STARS COME DOWN

by Beth Steel

Audition Extracts

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Not for further distribution or performance.

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1. Maggie & Tony

Act Two · reunion

A pub garden, afternoon. The family are getting ready for Sylvia's wedding meal.

Tony stands alone with Sylvia's bouquet. Maggie spots him ...

Maggie What you doing, Dad?

Tony Our Sylvia gave me this, she said she'd be back but –

Maggie She might want it on the table, look.

Maggie sets about placing the bouquet.

Tony What do you reckon to him?

Maggie Marek? He seems lovely. You like him, don't you?

Tony I don't know him.

Maggie Dad.

Tony It's all so rushed, our Maggie.

Maggie She couldn't stay home forever.

Tony I've never wanted her to.

Beat.

Maggie I know I've been crap, Dad, not visiting.

Tony Your sisters miss you.

Maggie I miss them – I miss you. Everyone.

Tony You didn't see your lad when he was home on leave.

Maggie He didn't want me to come. Liam's at that age where he's all his mates.

Tony says nothing.

Maggie I'm not a bad mother.

Tony I never said you were.

Maggie I'm just having a bad moment.

Tony What's a matter now?

Maggie Everyone always assumes the worst of me when ...

Tony Don't get upset.

Maggie I can't help it.

Tony Come on, it's your sister's day today and –

Maggie I'm scared, Dad.

Beat.

Maggie I'm scared.

Tony What you scared of? When your sisters took their first steps they held onto the furniture, you sat up one day and walked straight through the middle of the room. From then on, you'd stalk up to anything. And when you wanted something ...!

Maggie Remember what Mam used to call me? Grabby Maggie.

Tony You were always grabbing things.

Maggie And getting my hand slapped for it too. I couldn't help myself. Or maybe I just didn't understand why I couldn't take what I wanted. The boys did ... Well, I can't just take what I want. I know that now ... Dad ... do you believe there's only one person for each of us? One true love?

Tony For me there was.

Maggie You never think you might meet someone else?

Tony No.

Maggie But you've years ahead of you?

Tony I've had my love.

Maggie (*imploring*) But how does a person live the rest of their days without it?

Tony I don't know what you're asking me, our Maggie.

Maggie I've been married so many times and I never loved any of them ...

Tony You could've told me that before I paid for 'em.

Maggie But at the time I thought I did, but I'd just made it up in my head. True love isn't something you make up ... it's like black ice on a road, you don't even know it's there until you've taken the fall –

2. Aunty Carol & Maggie

Act Three · candyfloss

A pub garden, evening; fairy lights are lit. A disco is heard, possibly Lady Gaga.

Aunty Carol runs across clutching her shoes ...

Aunty Carol *(squealing)* This is my song! This is my song!

Aunty Carol dances, wildly.

Aunty Carol is being sick in a bush whilst Maggie waits. Aunty Carol emerges.

Aunty Carol The last time I drunk vodka, I wiped my bottom with candyfloss. Blackpool, years ago. *(Forlornly at the bush.)* I just remembered that now.

Maggie Candyfloss?

Aunty Carol Very sticky.

Maggie Why would you do that?

Aunty Carol *(obviously)* Because it's pink. Candyfloss is pink.

Maggie Okay. Let's sit down ...

Aunty Carol I need a drink.

Maggie Have some water.

Aunty Carol These tablets I'm taking, my back. Digging up dahlias ... months ago.

Maggie Well, some tablets you shouldn't drink alcohol with.

Aunty Carol And some people live in California, I'm not one of them.

Aunty Carol picks up some leftover bread from the table but it's soggy ...

Aunty Carol Booze makes me hungry and horny, nothing good comes from either. You laugh. *(Small sharp turn.)* I'm not just Aunty Carol, you know?

Maggie I know you're not.

Aunty Carol One day, Maggie May, you will be old. The thing no one tells you about being old is that it lasts a *long time*. I don't see our Sylvia and Marek lasting.

Maggie What d'you mean?

Aunty Carol I can't see a future. Mark my words, there's a story about him.

Maggie There's a story about everyone.

Aunty Carol I dint like what he said to our Hazel either.

Maggie Our Hazel was out of line.

Aunty Carol Well, I dint like it. Your dad did us proud though. Pete could never do a speech like that. Pete is like a pie with no pastry bottom. He's got no foundations.

Maggie You know me Uncle Pete loves you.

Aunty Carol Course he does. And I love him. I just wish he wasn't such a daft prat.

Beat.

Aunty Carol What're you running from, Maggie May?

Maggie Running? I'm not running.

Aunty Carol You take off one day never to return.

Maggie I'm here, aren't I?

Aunty Carol You'd only had that new three-piece suite a week – you'd not even had the beauty of it: forking out DFS prices only to sit on it a week.

Maggie I'd got a job.

Aunty Carol You had a job here. Your family.

Maggie People do move, you know.

Aunty Carol Not round here, not at your age. You're not in debt again –

Maggie Why does everyone always assume –

Aunty Carol Are you hoping to meet someone there?

Maggie No. The blokes there are no different to what's here anyway.

Aunty Carol There's got be better than this bloody shower.

Maggie I like being single.

Aunty Carol Just put in an appearance every now and then for your dad's sake.

Maggie He can come and visit me, you know.

Aunty Carol Well, you do as you please.

Maggie You all think I'm selfish and thoughtless –

Aunty Carol If it's too much trouble –

Maggie I can't come back here!

Beat.

Aunty Carol Why ever not?

Maggie Christ, I need a drink ...

Maggie leaves.

3. Sylvia & Marek

Act Three · the wedding row

The pub garden, later the same day.

Marek charges on, followed by Sylvia.

Marek Every time Hazel disrespects me you say nothing.

Sylvia What do you mean?

Marek You don't see it?

Sylvia See what?

Marek Doesn't matter.

Sylvia Marek.

Marek It doesn't matter, Sylvia.

Sylvia I know she can be a twat. She talks shit sometimes, she –

Marek She's a bigot.

Beat.

Marek Sorry but she is. And you ignore it.

Sylvia I don't ignore –

Marek You don't say anything.

Sylvia She's my sister.

Marek I'm your husband.

Sylvia What do you want me to say?

Marek It's not for me to put the words / into your mouth.

Sylvia I'll say it, I will, I will.

Marek You don't have to say anything, Sylvia, I can speak for myself.

Sylvia I know you can.

Marek I'm not a guest at my own wedding. I'm not a guest.

Sylvia Course you're not.

Marek Your dad couldn't even remember my name!

Sylvia He was just nervous.

Marek You know he never asks me a question. About myself.

Sylvia It's how he is. How some men are.

Marek Why are you making excuses?

Sylvia I'm not but people are different.

Marek You mean I'm different.

Sylvia Why are you shouting?

Marek I won't be quiet anymore.

Sylvia When have I wanted you to be?

Marek You couldn't hit that glass fast enough.

Sylvia What was I supposed to do? It's our wedding day! / I'm not gunner fight –

Marek Yes, it is! And still your sister insults me.

Sylvia She don't mean it. / She don't, Marek.

Marek Please please stop making excuses your sister is racist.

Sylvia At least my sister's at our wedding, unlike your mum.

Marek My mother.

Sylvia But then I'm not Polish, not a Catholic, and we know how disappointed –

Marek My mum is disappointed because she wants me in Poland / and now knows ...

Sylvia Yeah yeah, stop making excuses.

Marek You've never even met my mother.

Sylvia Because she's too prejudiced to come to her own son's wedding!

Marek Your whole family is backward and bigoted –

Sylvia If you hate my family why did you marry me?

4. Maggie & John

Act Three · tomatoes and Vegas

Outside, the same evening.

Maggie alone. She lights a cigarette; after a moment John appears ... A minute later ...

Maggie That rain.

John I know. Out of nowhere.

Maggie Slamming down like that. But everything sparkles now. Smells of green ...

John You ever properly smelt the vine of a tomato? Well, that's what it smells like: green. I never knew a colour had a smell before but it does ... I've been growing tomatoes. Whilst I've been at home, you know.

Maggie I've never been green-fingered.

John They're not hard to grow.

Maggie I'm sorry you've been finished at work, I dint know.

John (*sharpish*) Why would you?

Maggie Something will come up, your experience ...

John I want to do something else.

Maggie Like what?

John Not sure yet but I want a change. Fresh start.

Beat.

Maggie Auntie Carol's pissed as a fart. She's been bollocking that vodka down her.

Maggie laughs a little.

John It's good to see you.

Maggie It's good to be here.

John You look ... really well.

Maggie Thanks. (*Stubs out her cigarette.*) I should probably – go inside –

John You stopping there then?

Maggie Yeah, yeah, I think so.

John You see a future?

Maggie I try not to think about the future ... me own anyway.

John Why's that?

Maggie I don't know, has a way of not turning out how you expected so ...

She goes to leave, but stays ...

John What did you want to be when you were growing up?

Maggie (*laughing*) What?

John What'd you want to be?

Maggie No one's ever asked me that.

Beat.

Maggie Glamorous. I wanted to be something glamorous. An air stewardess. Not EasyJet though. One of those where you get a smart uniform and little bag to pull as you soar above the world.

John I can see that, yeah.

Maggie What did you want?

John To be an artist.

Maggie An artist?!

John Not an artist but something where I could draw. As a kid I loved drawing, spent hours at it. We had a library near us and I'd go after school and sit on floor and copy out pictures from books. It's shut now.

Maggie What things did you draw?

John All sorts ...

But she wants to know.

John I can't remember now ...

He can.

John Well, my favourite was insects.

Maggie Insects?

John Up close they're beautiful. So many different patterns. Delicate lines. And the colours!

Maggie I've always liked butterflies ... you don't often see them now.

John You don't, no ... You ever seen a firefly, you get them in America.

Maggie Fireflies?

John They glow in dark. I've seen it on YouTube: thousands of 'em glowing at night like small fires. Like stars you can reach, hold in the palm of your hand, but instead they're flying all around you and you're in middle on it ... I want to experience that before I die.

Maggie I want to go to America.

John Yeah? Which part?

Maggie All of it. But if I had to choose just one place, it'd be Vegas.

John *(with approval)* Yeah.

Maggie Everywhere just bursting with neon, I want to see that. And the fountains, pyramids, castles. In Vegas you can have your breakfast in New York, your dinner in Paris, and a nightcap in Venice. But one afternoon, I'd drive into the desert. All the rocks there are red and huge and when the sun hits it looks like they're on fire ...

John I want to see that.

Maggie Me too. I don't know how but ...

John You will. You go for things.

Maggie For all good it's done me.

John It's brave.

Maggie No one else thinks so.

John They don't see what I see.

Maggie Well anyway, I'm not brave; I'm scared most of the time.

John What of?

Beat.

Maggie Don't be. I should get back inside.

John First time we've talked since this morning.

Maggie I've not had much of a chance.

John Every time I look at you, you look away –

Maggie (*sharp*) Then stop looking at me!

Beat.

Maggie Get yourself a pint of water.

John I can't stop.

Maggie You've had a skinful.

John I can't carry on like this.

Maggie I'm leaving in morning.

5. Tony & Sarah

Act Four · the stone

The garden, evening. Tony and his youngest granddaughter, alone for a moment.

Tony I've just got a sad face. It's quite misleading.

Tony picks up a small stone by his foot ...

Sarah What have you got?

Tony A stone.

She comes to look ...

Tony I always used to be on the lookout for stones, bits of fossil, to bring home. When my Sylvia was as high as you are now she collected them. Boxes and boxes we had, and I'd tell her these stories.

Sarah Where did you get fossils?

Tony For most of my life, I worked deep down inside the earth.

Sarah As deep as the deep end in a swimming pool?

Tony Much deeper.

Sarah Is it really old?

Tony Well, let's see now ... Old enough to have been inside a volcano.

Sarah A volcano!

Tony Stepped on by a dinosaur with thighs like you would not believe. Trapped in an iceberg. Dropped in a lake heaving with hippos. Sunk in swamps, battered by winds, baked by the sun ... the last time it was held was in the hands of a bored little cave girl who picked it up one afternoon and lobbed it at a woolly mammoth to pass the time. It is four hundred and eighty million years old ...

Sarah What happens to it next?

Tony I don't know. It will outlive me. And you. And everyone here.

Sarah I think it will be sucked up by a spaceship and eaten by an alien who never poos. But if we hide it no one will find it and it can stay where it is forever.

Tony It can't stay put forever.

Sarah Why?

Tony Because all this will become something else.

Sarah Why will it?

Tony Just that over time everything changes ...

Beat.

Sarah I'm going to hide it anyway.

Tony Before you go ... let me do your hair.

Sarah My hair?

Tony It's come out at the back. I can do it ... done it for my own girls enough times.

She stands before him.

Tony I can manage one more ...

He releases her hair; for a moment he just holds it in his hands ... And ties a little girl's hair into a ponytail one last time.

Sarah Thanks.

Hazel (off): "Sarah?" Sarah runs off as Aunty Carol appears ...

6. Tony & Aunty Carol

Act Four · the Tarzan scene

The garden, later the same evening.

Aunty Carol Christ, it's that time of night when Super Sue thinks it's a good idea to do the splits. This heat. It's no cooler out here.

Tony (*distracted*) No.

Aunty Carol Let me take a weight off these sling-backs. I'm not getting any younger.

Tony Does it bother you? Getting older.

Aunty Carol Well, there's not a lot we can do about it. I'd have liked more of the middle bit mind.

Tony It don't scare you?

Aunty Carol I've found it to be a lot like cottage cheese actually: not nearly as frightening as I thought.

Tony But when you're getting old alone ...

Aunty Carol You're not alone.

Tony You know what I mean.

Aunty Carol Well, what about meeting someone?

Tony I wouldn't betray Linda's memory like that.

Aunty Carol It wouldn't be a betrayal.

Tony I'm alright as I am.

Aunty Carol You can't stand still, you know. The girls have got their own lives now.

Tony No one would want me anyroad. I mean look at me ...

Aunty Carol (*surveys him*) Well, I'm not gunner lie.

Tony You don't have to tell truth either.

Aunty Carol You're not in your pomp, Tone. Tops of your arms have gone droopy.

Tony Droopy?

Aunty Carol Saggy and you had muscular arms. Sometimes you stoop – not all time but I have noticed – you've got a bald spot coming on the back of your head, your crow's feet are only gerrin deeper, you should've had your teeth done years ago, and you've recently acquired the facial expression of a man chewing a wasp.

Tony Right. Have I got owt going for me?

Aunty Carol Well, I'm not gunner lie ...

Tony I wish you bloody would.

Aunty Carol You've got gravitas.

Tony Gravitas?

Aunty Carol And there's not many fellas this side of Mansfield with that.

Tony Gravitas, eh.

Aunty Carol You were a twinkly boggler in your day, you've still got some of that.

Tony You've not changed one bit: you were a chuffing handful then and still are.

They laugh.

Tony Do you remember when I was Tarzan?

Aunty Carol You've been a lot of things to me over the years but –

Tony I was Tarzan to your Jane.

Aunty Carol Gerraway.

Tony We were at Club one New Year's Day and there were the usual games on: yard of ale, string on a spoon, guess the song, and the newly conceived Tarzan and Jane contest. To be the best Tarzan you had to compete in three tasks: do the best Tarzan holler, wrestle a crocodile – the Club dint have one but you had to dive on the floor and pretend – and rescue Jane by carrying her across a swamp.

Aunty Carol And you did all that?

Tony Did it? I won! You can't remember?

Aunty Carol New Year's Day, you say, it's possible I was arseholed.

Tony I can't believe you can't remember! I were brilliant. And you were a good Jane.

Aunty Carol Was I?

Tony Just the right amount of distress.

Aunty Carol Well, go on then, show me your Tarzan.

Tony I'm not doing it now.

Aunty Carol Just the call. Do your Tarzan call.

Tony Chuff off.

Aunty Carol Go on, / go on, I bet you've still gorrit.

Tony I'm not chuffing doing it, / I'm not.

Aunty Carol Go on, it's only us. Just the call. For old times.

Tony starts a holler ... It comes out puny and strangled. He starts again, this time giving his all; it's uncannily brilliant and unleashes the rest ... Tony dives on the floor and rolls around wrestling a crocodile. He finally masters the croc and stabs it repeatedly in the neck. Aunty Carol stands on a chair ...

Aunty Carol Help! Tarzan, help!

Tony *(to himself, almost a growl)* Jane?

Aunty Carol There's a lion!

Tony jumps up and runs to save Aunty Carol. He puts her on his shoulder and lifts her off the chair ... They tumble into a heap on the ground ... and they laugh and laugh and roll about in the grass and at some point ... flat on their backs they turn their heads to one another ...

Tony Can you hear that?

Beat.

Aunty Carol What is it?

Beat.

Tony The earth ... moving ... under us.

Beat.

Tony My life's been as still as a paperweight, Carol.

Aunty Carol A paperweight?

Tony Since Linda died, that's what I've been. Standing fast, I thought, holding steady. But I've been stuck. You know, stuck.

Aunty Carol I do. I'm stuck now, I can't gerrup.

7. Tony & Pete

Act Four · the picket line (Aunty Carol present throughout – read in or cast light)

Continuous from the previous extract. Tony and Aunty Carol are still in a heap on the ground.

Tony tries to help Carol but they fail and fall back. Pete appears with a pint ...

Pete What's going off here?

Aunty Carol It's not what it looks like.

Tony and Carol laugh.

Pete What are you doing on your back?

Aunty Carol Pete's always had a jealous streak.

Tony Well, I bet it's not the first time you've flattened some grass.

Tony and Carol laugh.

Pete That's enough!

Tony (to Pete) We're only having a bit of fun.

Pete Come on, we're going.

Aunty Carol You can bollocks, I'm not going anywhere.

Pete And I'm not standing here being made a fool of.

Tony Forget it. Haven't we both been fools?

Pete Is he talking to me?

Aunty Carol Pete.

Pete There's no going back from that.

Tony I'm not wasting my breath.

Pete You betrayed me. You betrayed your class.

Tony All these years later, look at us. We've gotten old, our kid.

Pete Don't call me that.

Tony The world's moved on, isn't it time we did?

Aunty Carol Pete, please.

Tony It's all gone, everything that was, we're all that's left of it.

Pete Haven't you forgotten something?

Tony I've not forgotten.

Pete You crossed a line.

Tony I know I did.

Pete You crossed the picket line.

Tony Four decades ago.

Pete Don't matter how long ago / it was.

Aunty Carol Oh for Christ's sake.

Pete There are lines you don't cross. Thou shalt not cross a picket line.

Tony Thou shalt not hate thy brother.

Pete Brother now, is it? When you crossed that line you stopped being my brother.

Tony I'm not listening to this bollocks.

Pete And I will *never* forgive you and the rest of you scabbing bastards for it.

Tony If a scab is a man with his own mind, I'll always be one!

Pete I should've knocked you out back then –

Tony I'd have had you then and I'll have you now.

The men fight.

Aunty Carol Your knees, Pete, think about your knees!

The men continue to fight. Aunty Carol pelts cobs and sausage rolls at them to stop ...

8. Hazel & John

Act Five · the bad patch

Hazel's, the small hours. The house has emptied out around them.

Maggie leaves.

Aunty Carol You must be gasping for a tea, our John?

No response.

Aunty Carol Well, I'll put kettle on anyway ...

Aunty Carol leaves.

Hazel What's a matter?

John Nothing.

Hazel Then why do you look like you've been shot?

Little pause.

Hazel John?

John Tired.

Hazel Me too. I wasn't. It's just come over me ... been running on empty.

John Long day.

Hazel I'm glad it's over with.

Beat.

Hazel I'm just glad.

She is looking at him, he doesn't say anything.

Hazel There was this time, few year ago, I was on my way to Asda for some bits and there'd been a bad smash. Heading up to it I recognised the car and felt *dread* shoot through me, I thought it was you. As I got closer I realised it wasn't and I felt this *amazed relief*: someone else's life had changed forever but we'd survived. And in that moment the world outside my car was ... astonishing. Seconds later the feeling was gone ... I don't know why we don't hold on to it more. I should've pulled up somewhere and put the radio on and got out the car and danced. Why don't we do that? Dance while we can.

She laughs, giddy.

Hazel Oh my God I am light-headed. I'm starting to sound like our chuffing Sylvia. She's at the hospital by the way with that wank stain, I've not spoken to her but I will in morning. Once she's gotten over the shock she'll see sense and drop him. It'll be hard but soon enough everything will be how it was.

John No, it won't.

Hazel You don't think our Leanne will be alright? I'm calling doctors / in morning.

John I wasn't talking about our Leanne.

Beat.

Hazel Well anyroad it's late, we should get to bed.

John We need to talk.

Hazel It'll have to wait.

John I can't keep on like this.

Hazel I'm going to bed.

John We can't keep on as we are.

Hazel That's exactly what we're going to do!

Beat.

Hazel We keep on until we're out of this bad patch.

John *Bad patch?! I'm dead. I am dead inside –*

Hazel Don't say that.

John Ask me why, ask me; ask me anything!

She doesn't.

John You won't; even now you won't –

Hazel Since when have you been interested in what I have to say?

John You don't ask me anything.

Hazel You haven't been interested in me for a long time.

John You shut me down!

Hazel Do you know how hurtful it is –

John It's the truth –

Hazel How *humiliating* it is to be with a man who won't make love to me –

John I can't, I've tried. I've tried.

Beat.

Hazel You don't think I already know that? That I didn't feel it was *an effort* for you even before it stopped altogether? You're not the only one who's felt *shut down*. You're just a man so you think you are. Well let me tell you, the unhappiness you've felt, I've felt too. And I'm saying we can get through it –

John Why do you refuse to see what's in front you?

Little pause.

Hazel How about we see what's in front of you if you walk out that door? To begin with you'll be sofa surfing whilst you sort out some work because as a single man you aren't anyone's priority: you will get fuck all *and* be paying me maintenance. You might get a job doing deliveries or somert up at warehouse but you won't have enough to run an house, never mind rent one. You can't keep on stopping on sofas so you'll move into digs above a pub. One of them poxy bedsits down street with a little kettle in to make Pot Noodles. It'll be bleak. So you'll start going downstairs in evenings, having a couple of pints. Eventually it will dawn on you that the only way you can make this hopeless situation work is to stop working. That's when things get really bleak, when you give up work altogether and you start to look like one of them. You

know the type, they all look the same: *lost*. Lost men, lost boys, who once thought they'd have a better life. God knows there's plenty of 'em round here. One more won't make any odds.

Pause.

Hazel See you in morning.

Hazel turns away; we see what that took.

9. Leanne & Marek

Act Four · the buffet

The wedding reception. The others have drifted off, leaving Leanne and Marek at the buffet table.

Marek Your Uncle Pete, I like him.

Leanne Yeah, he's funny.

Marek Why do him and Tony not speak?

Leanne I don't know really. Just always been like that.

Marek There must be a reason.

Leanne I think that is the reason. Just how it's always been.

Leanne now joins him at the buffet.

Leanne That's supposed to be a hedgehog.

Marek This?

Leanne I know. Mad, isn't it.

Beat.

Leanne I wouldn't go for the quiche.

Marek No?

Leanne Pappy pastry.

Marek Huh?

Leanne You're better off with a sausage roll.

Marek I don't eat pork.

Leanne How come?

Marek I worked in a pork factory. And the pigs know.

Leanne The pigs know?

Marek That they are doomed. They are screaming soon as they arrive. My job was to calm the pigs down. Stressed pigs are tough pigs. But how can you calm down an animal that knows?

Beat.

Marek What is this?

Leanne Scampi. It's alright.

Marek What job will you do when you leave school?

Leanne Warehouse probably. They're always taking people on.

Marek You need to have plans, not the warehouse, you have a better future.

Leanne Who knows what the future's going to be.

Marek I have a good feeling.

Leanne I think it's going to be shit.

Marek *(laughs)* You are young. Everything is pain when you are young.

Leanne I see where things are heading.

Marek You are very serious teenager. You know, life always turns out differently.

Leanne No it won't because people are selfish and only think about themselves.

Marek People are not terrible, we are all just trying to live our lives.

Leanne What about our lives, what about me and Sarah?

She might cry.

Marek Hey, hey, what is this? Don't cry. It's going to be okay.

Leanne People are always saying that but ...

End of extracts. Text: Till the Stars Come Down by Beth Steel (Faber, 2024). Compiled for Network Theatre audition purposes only.