

SCENE.

A man walks on to the stage. He stops and looks out to the audience. He's talking to us, but he's not. Not really.

MAN

Little Star.

We never met. Not really. You never saw me, never heard my voice, not really. You were there, you were real, you were coming. You were wanted and real. We had only just started to get used to the idea of what you were going to be. The idea you would fill a place in our world, and you would make our world richer, greater, fuller. You were there, but you weren't. Not really. But really, of course, you were. I just couldn't see you yet. We couldn't feel you yet.

We were patient, though, we knew what was coming. We knew it all because we'd been there before. Eat right, get the rest, get ready. So ready. Not really.

I wanted you here. I wanted you here. We wanted you here. I have to keep telling myself that, over and over, although now, as I look back, it feels like it's something I have to convince myself of. It's not something I feel. Not really. I wish I did. I wish there was a way I could feel your life, know your soul, understand your presence in what we lived. But I couldn't. Not really.

No one will ever believe you when you say fathers have it hard. We don't. Not really. We don't carry life, we don't supply natural food. We don't possess the neurons to bond instantly with something of our flesh. A father is necessary and needed and wanted and vital, but not really.

Without a mother, a baby will... no.

Without a father, a baby will... not really.

They need you because they need someone, and since you're here and responsible, you're the one who's looked to for help. But in the end, you're an appendage. Something they absolutely need except for the times when they don't, because it's nice to have someone in that role, but you can also feel as though you're not really there for that. You're there to complete the picture. And that's nice. But it's not important. Not really.

I didn't carry you. I didn't carry your brother either. Or your sister. I carried the hope of my family, the expectations of my family, the needs of my family, the provider role, the man who will bring what is needed when

the vital people live their vital lives in the vital sphere and the vital work is happening to make vital things happen. And that's not a problem. Not really. Because that's what we sign up for.

We're *told* the instinct of protecting this helpless creature will just... kick in. We're *told* that one look at this tiny person with the mixed-up genes and there'll be some kind of magical revelation. But it's not magic you need, it's time. That bond with your brother came later than I expected, but it came. Time turned that little stranger into a little buddy and night feedings weren't the chore I expected. Not really.

And you. You were needed and wanted and hoped for and loved but you were also unknown and distant and arbitrary and meaningless. Not really. But yes really. How do I square with that fact that I can't find that grief? How do I manage the fact that I forget more often than I remember? That I forget the Little Star?

A life is a life is a life is a life and I willingly contributed to creating yours. And I don't think about it. Not really.

The internet told us you were slipping from us. The internet isn't particularly comforting. Not really. Symptoms mean this but it could also mean this. We don't know but it could be and what if and see your doctor and wait and see and maybe it's a false alarm and maybe that was something and when was the last time and was that spotting and what should we do? Hours in an emergency room where you're explicitly told this is not actually an emergency because there's nothing to be done right now and all that time all I could feel was that I wasn't feeling anything. Not really. I was worried for your mother and for the disappointment in what we would do next but I couldn't figure out how to worry about something so hypothetical and unseen that it wasn't real. Not really. To me, in that moment, I had to face up to the knowledge that for myself, your life was a concept I could not muster grief for. Not really. What kind of person does that?

Because there are enough reasons for why I felt that way: exclusion, extraction, selfishness, difficulty, pain: self-medicating on the internet, that same internet that told us we might be right in thinking there was a problem was also the same internet that showed me that yes, you, fearful privileged man, do have a problem. Seeking out comfort in places where none was to be found. Not realizing the truth was at home, at home, in that place where it was hiding if only I had the courage to seek it out. In that place where your brother gurgled and your mother sweated and your life grew, was not enough because I traded in fear and

selfishness. I burned off the ends of nerves that were needed. Needed to register your life. Nerves I hadn't used enough. Not really.

When we lost you, on the day we came home without any real answers, I used that selfishness, that lack of maturity, that lack of patience and empathy, to escape. To take a bus to work to sit at a desk to do a job no one was asking me to do because it was easier to run away and hide than it was to stay home and grieve. Because I didn't know how to grieve. Not really. I wasn't carrying you. I didn't feel you within me. I didn't feel you slip away. You hardly showed in our lives when you went away. Your mother wasn't even showing yet. Not really.

You were abstract. Abstract. You were *not* abstract. You were real. But I can't escape the fact that you *felt* abstract to me. For a little while. For all your life. And still. I cannot conjure up the Little Star.

I went in to work that day, when your mother needed me most. But I didn't *need* to go to work. Not really. I have to carry that knowledge for the rest of my life.

I went to work.

I went to work.

I went to work.

No one at work cared if I was there that day. Work was an escape. A place of glamor where I was more than just that appendage-father. I had a purpose that to me felt more tangible than anything else. Because with parenthood it's the boredom, the repetition, the soul-crushing tediousness they don't tell you about. But at work, there were reports to write and coffees to drink and small-talk to make to cover up the fact that one of the worst mornings of our lives... that morning we had spent in the emergency room hearing news we didn't quite believe was real. Not really.

*I'll just pop in for a few hours.*

*Coming out of the subway.*

*You need to come home.*

*But I'm all the way downtown.*

*I need you.*

*I'll be home in a few hours.*

*Okay.*

I won. I lost.