

THE SIGN
By Tom Moran

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THE SIGN

SETTING:

Time: a little before sunset

Place: a clearing in the woods

CHARACTERS:

ARTHUR, late 30's

JOANNA, about 2 years older than Arthur

(Lights up on ARTHUR, who sits on a small camp chair by a tent, dressed for cold. He has hiked here. It is nearing dusk, and as the play progresses lights slowly dim. ARTHUR scans the sky methodically with binoculars. JOANNA enters stage right carrying a small pack and dressed for cold. She sees ARTHUR and freezes at first. ARTHUR spots her through the binoculars. He squints, focuses them, then looks over them and sees her, surprised.)

JOANNA

Hi. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to walk into your campsite. You're just kind of, in the middle of the trail.

ARTHUR

(looks around, chagrined)

My apologies, I didn't expect to see anyone else up here. Let me just move the tent-

JOANNA

No, no, it's okay. It'll be dark soon, I doubt anyone else is coming through.

ARTHUR

Are you sure?

JOANNA

I think you're fine. Are you a birder?

ARTHUR

What? (Looks at binoculars in his hand.) Oh no, no. Just watching the skies. Arthur.

JOANNA

Joanna. Me too. I came up to take in the sunset.

ARTHUR

You came here by yourself?

JOANNA

I'm, just passing through town. I thought I'd watch darkness fall on Woodland before I go.

ARTHUR

Well, you should be careful out in the woods. Lots of crazies out here. Damn teenagers too.

JOANNA

Thanks for the tip. You mind if I watch the sunset from here? It's the best spot.

ARTHUR

By all means.

(He continues methodically scanning the sky with the binoculars, scanning one section of the sky in a regular back-and-forth motion before moving to the next. JOANNA finally speaks.)

JOANNA

Watching the skies for what?

ARTHUR

Are you from here? From Woodland?

JOANNA

I was one of those damn teenagers, a couple lifetimes ago. But I got the hell out of this dump after high school.

ARTHUR

Then you must know about the Woodland Lights.

JOANNA

Oh, okay. I guess those are about this time of year, right?

ARTHUR

Yeah, spring solstice is when they seem to come out.

JOANNA

I remember my mom used to drag us into the backyard to watch for them. We never saw them, but we didn't mind, we always got hot chocolate out of it. Have you seen anything?

ARTHUR

Tonight? No. But I keep looking. I grew up near here too, and I come back every year that I can.

JOANNA

Have you ever seen them?

ARTHUR

You'd think I'd keep coming back if I hadn't?

JOANNA

So what did you see?

ARTHUR

It was about twenty-five years ago, now.

JOANNA

Wow. Twenty-five years ago?

ARTHUR

Yeah. Why?

JOANNA

Nothing, that's just a long time. Go on.

ARTHUR

I was 14 years old, and I was on a Boy Scout campout. We had our tents set up on a knob not too far from here-

JOANNA

The one off the old farm road? There's a Chipotle there now?

ARTHUR

Oh, you know it.

JOANNA

Yeah, I've been past there a few times.

ARTHUR

Anyway, it was pretty late. Everyone was hunkered down in their tents but I couldn't sleep. So I got up and poked at the campfire, got it going again. I remember it was cold.

JOANNA

It was. (She pulls her jacket tighter.) I mean, it always is this time of year.

ARTHUR

And I heard this noise in the distance. It was faint, and garbled, but there were patterns in it, like rhythm or speech or some sort of - I don't know. It didn't sound, random.

JOANNA

(Realization.)

Oh wow. That's weird, huh? Could you make out any words?

ARTHUR

Maybe. At one point I think I heard, "open up your eyes."

JOANNA

Open up *your* eyes?

ARTHUR

Yeah. It was so spooky and disconcerting and it just, seared into my brain. And then came the lights. All different colors. High up in the trees. Darting around like mad, sometimes reflecting off the clouds, sometimes near the ground, in the woods and all around me.

JOANNA

That's - something.

ARTHUR

And then one of them shone right on me. Just for an instant. It blinded me, then shot straight back up into the sky. When I could see again, it was all over. Just silence and darkness and a dying fire.

JOANNA

That must have been quite an experience.

ARTHUR

I've never forgotten it.

JOANNA

So that's why you keep coming back here.

ARTHUR

Wouldn't you?

JOANNA

It takes a lot to bring me back here.

ARTHUR

Something like that, you want to see it again. Try to figure out what happened. What it meant.

JOANNA

Have you ever thought that, maybe it was just some random cosmic phenomenon giving Northern Arizona a fly-by? And that you were just hearing something you wanted to hear?

ARTHUR

Of course I have. But that explanation never quite sticks. There was too much order to it. Too much going on.

JOANNA

Or have you thought that maybe, even if it was deliberate, that it was a message meant for someone else?

ARTHUR

(Suspicious.)

Like who?

JOANNA

Oh, I wouldn't know. Just throwing that out there.

ARTHUR

(Firmer.)

No no no no no. Like who?

JOANNA

(Wincing.)

Like the guys at the kegger that was going on a couple miles down the road?

(Long pause.)

ARTHUR

Pardon me?

JOANNA

I'm sorry, I shouldn't have, I should go, it'll be dark soon.

ARTHUR

No. Not after that. Keep talking. Please.

JOANNA

You sure?

ARTHUR

Never surer.

JOANNA

It's just that, there was a party. Nothing special. Drinking cheap beer, smokin' weed, making out. And it was the week of the lights.

ARTHUR

Okay.

JOANNA

So my boyfriend Mark and I and a couple of his buddies decided to prank everybody.

ARTHUR

Oh my god.

JOANNA

One of their dads was a state trooper or something and he had some real powerful searchlights and a pretty kick-ass loudspeaker. We put some cool filters on the lights and figured out how make crazy garbled noise through the speaker. Then we cruised down the farm road to the party.

ARTHUR

Searchlights.

JOANNA

Yeah.

ARTHUR

And a speaker.

JOANNA

Pretty bitchin' one, as I recall.

ARTHUR

And what did you play through the speaker?

JOANNA

Just ... some noise we picked out.

ARTHUR

I think you can get more specific than that.

JOANNA

Some music.

ARTHUR

That was music?

JOANNA

It was "The Sign."

ARTHUR

"The Sign." You mean, Ace of Base?

(JOANNA mumbles and makes a helpless expression.)

ARTHUR (cont.)

My adolescent spiritual epiphany was Ace of Base?!

JOANNA

I mean, there were lights too.

ARTHUR

I need to sit down.

(He sits. Pause.)

JOANNA

The song just fit. You know, "I saw the sign, and it opened up my eyes." I guess you misheard that part. (Pause.) And I mean, to be fair, it was played at half-speed from a Discman inside a Froot Loops box filled with Kleenex. So it was really more like (*slow and unintelligible*) "I saw the sign, and it-"

ARTHUR

You're not helping.

JOANNA

I was sixteen! We had no idea anyone would take it seriously! I mean, afterwards Mark drove to the party dressed like Darth Vader and we all laughed our asses off.

ARTHUR

(rueful)

Ace of Base.

JOANNA

It was a pretty catchy song.

(ARTHUR laughs, at first mirthless, then building to something energetic and genuine.)

JOANNA (cont.)

This is maybe not the reaction I expected.

ARTHUR

Finally. I have someone to thank.

JOANNA

For...?

ARTHUR

Well, you know. Woodland is such a tiny place.

JOANNA

(agreeing)

Tell me about it.

ARTHUR

We never had much money, my parents never took us anywhere. I was going to take over my dad's gas station after high school and do that for the rest of my life. Take up permanent residence in a Springsteen song, you know? Instead, I started reading about UFO's. And that led to reading about lenticular clouds, and aeronautics, and history, and all of a sudden I cared about something bigger, and when I finished high school I joined the Navy. I'd never even seen the ocean! I served all over the world, Japan, the Middle East, Central America. I made a life out of it, thousands of miles from home. And now I work for U.N. Peacekeeping Forces. I'm just here on a break.

JOANNA

That sounds intense.

ARTHUR

Which part?

JOANNA

Yes.

ARTHUR

So again: thank you. You and your meathead friends in that Jeep rescued me from a life at Texaco.

JOANNA

How'd you know it was a Jeep?

ARTHUR

Of course it was a Jeep.

(JOANNA laughs. Pause.)

ARTHUR (cont.)

You're leaving in the morning, you said?

JOANNA

I'm helping my dad move to a condo out in Tempe, near my husband and I. This is the last night I'll ever spend here.

ARTHUR

Not even, like, reunions?

JOANNA

(Shrugs.)

Mark, he was a pretty awful boyfriend. Things with him got ugly and I had to clear out of town fast. Never had much call to come back.

ARTHUR

I'm sorry to hear that.

JOANNA

It sure is pretty out here, though. That's why I hiked up. One last look at my hometown before I turn the page.

ARTHUR

Sometimes - it pays to flip back a few chapters. You never know if maybe you missed something important on the first read.

JOANNA

Valid point.

ARTHUR

Do you have a headlamp to get back down?

JOANNA

Yeah, and I know the way well enough. I'm fine.

(ARTHUR stands.)

ARTHUR

Well, then, you're welcome to stick around for a bit if you'd like. I'm gonna go gather some firewood.

JOANNA

You're staying up here?

ARTHUR

It's not like you invented the lights. Who knows, maybe there's another surprise out there for us.

JOANNA

Maybe.

(He hands her the binoculars.)

ARTHUR

One way to find out.

(He starts to exit.)

JOANNA

You know, we played around with some other songs on the speaker. We almost went with "Waterfalls."

ARTHUR

"Don't go chasing waterfalls/Please stick to the rivers and the lakes that you're used to."

JOANNA

Yeah.

ARTHUR

Thanks for going the other way on that one.

(ARTHUR exits, humming opening bars of "The Sign." JOANNA looks after him, then through binoculars. There is a flash of light, and JOANNA gasps and lowers the binoculars in surprise. BLACKOUT.)