

Lucky Stars

I find my faith in the brilliant stars.

-The "Religious Views" of a friend on her Facebook profile
(To be included in program)

Scene 1

In a cozy living room with a coffee table downstage slightly right but angled towards centre with a chair on upstage edge facing the audience in which DREAMER, a typical-looking 20-year-old, is sitting. There's a smoothie in a tall glass with a spoon in it on the table in front of him and another across from him.

Stage lights irregularly but gradually turn on and off, reaching higher peaks, illuminating a larger area, and staying on longer with time. As the lights come on, DREAMER starts moving as if in conversation, at first moving his mouth without speaking and then letting out fragments of sentences.

DREAMER: ...and then...

...was thinking...

...picked it up off the...

...well, you know...

...actually understand exactly what...

(Finally, after 30 seconds of on and off, the lights come on and stay on.)

DREAMER: Oh man! I had the weirdest dream last night! You gotta hear this.

So first off, it was is in this completely different world. Well maybe not completely different — actually there was just one really big difference: there were no lights! Or sun or fire or anything to light things up except for stars. But not stars in the sky, although there were those too: people had collected stars out of the sky with these giant machines and everyone had to hold them up on streets, acting, essentially, like lampposts. But you didn't have to stand there all day; a couple people took turns working the same spot. It was like a job, and when people walked by your area, they would give you a couple o' their stars — for your service, you know?

So anyways, I'm sitting in this cozy, warm living room. But it's a little eerie 'cause the only light's shining in through the window, right? And there's an old man with shimmering white hair and some white stubble on his face sitting in front of me in a big armchair. And in that slow calm voice old people have, he says to me: "Now I'm starting to fade — like my stars. But before I go, let me tell you a story; not about me, not about my lucky stars, this is the story of my family: my son and my grandson." And there was no stopping him after that; he just went on with his story and as he was telling it, I could just picture everything perfectly.

"The day David was born was one of the greatest days of my life. It was as if all my life I had been preparing, training just for that: to pass on some of my stars — the stars I had worked so hard to amass my entire life — and to teach my son everything about how to protect and to build up one's collection. Of course, I can't claim to have been the perfect parent, but at his birth, I gave my son even more stars than my father had given me and I did my very best to impart to him all the good habits and the understanding I thought he would ever need.

"As these things go, after he had learned all there was to learn at home and at school, and had begun accumulating stars of his own, the time came for him to become a father. He married a nice girl from a good family whom he had known for two years, Debbie, and less than a year after their marriage, they had a son, Eddie. Twenty years after bringing a child of our own into the world, my wife Chandni and I were the proudest grandparents there could be. We were filled with such joy to see the stars we had passed on to David moving on to yet another generation. We could wish for nothing more and thought we had made it to the end, problem-free. Who could have guessed that this magical cycle would soon be broken?"

Ah! Jeez! I wish I could tell it more like he told it to me, with all the crazy little details! You just gotta imagine this like, glowing old man, so wrapped up in what he's saying, like he was reliving every moment as he told it, so unbelievably happy all through the first part and then just... so old and tired-looking with that last sentence. And it just seemed to get worse as he went on. It was like he went from being this jolly, old, Santa kind of figure to a guy that should be dead, but was somehow being kept alive, just to tell me his story.

(Blackout)

Scene 2

(After a short blackout, with the set unchanged, DREAMER continues)

DREAMER: It all started with Debbie's father's Alzheimer's. As always, it wasn't bad at first; he had to learn to carry a notebook with him, to write things down, to discover through small talk things people expected him to remember, and so on. It was not easy by any means, but he could cope. With time though, his situation gradually deteriorated and he started to lose his patience. He became angry and took out his anger on the only person around: his poor wife Nancy. When their children found out, of course they were devastated. Debbie took it especially badly. And who could blame her? For the months leading up to and following her parents' divorce, she stayed home all day and David took care of her as best he could when he was not out shining — earning stars to replace both his and Debbie's that had already begun to fade.

In the midst of all this, however, neither Debbie nor David was left with very much time or energy for Eddie. As for him, he could not fully understand the situation and simply wanted to escape the tension and sadness of the household and have a little fun like all the other boys his age. That's how it started, but at fifteen, a couple of his peers quickly recognized him as vulnerable and coaxed him into accompanying them to find some solace at a star spinner's. Like everyone who gazes at a spinning star, he was instantly mesmerized and stared for hours, paying dozens of stars for this wretched "service." But it was exactly what he wanted: something to keep him out of the house and to help him forget about the problems that awaited him there.

Eddie was never a bad kid — he was a boy and he liked to have his fun, but he never made any serious trouble. He went to school and learned how to hold stars properly, and although his teachers sometimes complained that he was rather excitable, they all liked him and knew he was a good boy. Still, there is only so much one can control and *anyone* can fall into the hands of the star spinners.

He did well at first — better than most. He did so well, in fact, that no one noticed a thing until it was too late. As you know, police cannot arrest people simply for going to the spinners; they can only arrest someone for committing one of the Four Crimes against Society: spinning; stealing another's stars; walking in one's light without paying; or attempting to navigate the city on the fringe of the dark areas without directly entering the lit spots. The Fourth Crime was originally established based on the assumption that it indicates one does not have enough stars to pay shiners and thus, is likely also committing the Second and Third Crimes. Naturally, some people simply enjoy a stroll in the darkness from time to time and others live on the outskirts because they were brought up there: it's their home. Even with the Second Crime, who can honestly claim never to have skirted behind someone, through their light, when they weren't looking? Tell me who? As for the First Crime, spinning, I could tell you stories you would never believe about the corruption that surrounds it! But you don't care about all this, do you? Nobody does.

Eddie never committed any Crime until he was a junior in college. Throughout high school, he would say he was playing at a friend's house after school but would go shine in a small neighbourhood not too far away but where no one would recognize him; he would ask his parents for a couple of extra stars to run around the city with his friends but would save them for the spinners. In fact, as we later found out, he rarely went about in the city, except for school, shining, and to see the spinners, and he always took the shortest route. Moreover, he truly made the best of the opportunity Chandni and I gave him to attend college; he studied diligently and quickly learned to clean and polish his stars, that they might light up a larger area and earn him more in return.

We could not pay for all of Eddie's the college expenses though, and even with his new skill and part-time shining, Eddie just could not make ends meet with so many of his stars going to the spinners; he started walking the fringes, but only when he really had to. Oh, he was careful! I don't think he ever would have been caught, if it weren't for Woozie, as they called her. She was an older girl he had met at a spinner's one night. He says they were never more than acquaintances, and that's probably why she named him."

(Blackout)

Scene 3

(After a short blackout, with the set unchanged, DREAMER continues)

DREAMER: "Yes, she named him alright. She knew the system well enough to realize that it was the only way she could avoid being locked up herself. Of course, Eddie could have done the same thing: all he needed to do was give a couple of other names and he could make a deal. But he didn't know the system, you see? Like so many other naïve people out there, he thought he would be best off just telling the honest truth — no one could convince him otherwise. He thought that would somehow be enough to earn him a reasonable sentence. But how mistaken he was! When it was all said and done, they gave him 27 years. Twenty-seven years! After they caught him walking along the fringes early one morning, they needed no more evidence save Woozie's testimony to convict him of two counts of the theft and five counts of fringe-walking.

In jail, Eddie quickly lost his... naïveté. He received the brutal awakening with which all new inmates are greeted but that no one likes to think about. The first thing they did was take away all save three

of his stars — and stars fade quickly in jail, so there are far too few to go around. Can you imagine life without one star?"

Obviously I could, but not the way he meant it, of course. He went on:

"A man without a star is a desperate man indeed. He will do anything to be able to hold one (I'm sort of attached to this "and", but if you really want to omit it, go ahead) and once he's got one, he will do whatever it takes to get his hands on another before the first one fades away. Since jails are entirely lit by state-employed shiners, however, there is no chance at getting a star legally; one must steal or spin, and spinners in jail can tell right away - from the look in your eyes - if you're hooked. On his first day, an exceptionally friendly inmate offered to spin a star for Eddie free of charge. In a time of such disillusionment, there was no way Eddie could resist; however, as the spinner knew would happen, Eddie came back within a few days, but that time it was not free. When it came time to pay, Eddie offered two of his final three stars but argued that he needed his last one just a little longer to earn a few more. He was even ready to fight to keep that last one — Eddie, who had never been in a fight in his entire life! That's when he realized he was not the only one seeing the spinner, and that everyone else was eager to do anything that might win them a couple of minutes of staring...

After three days in the infirmary, feeling worse than before since he had spent those three days without a star, Eddie was ready to learn how things worked. He started body building — learned to fight; he tattooed his body; and eventually, he did what he had to do to gain acceptance to a gang. None of us recognized him anymore — we all tried, but simply could not understand him at the time. We couldn't appreciate that as a gang member, he was entitled to a certain number of hours every week holding one of the gang's stars. There were risks, but when all one has is a life in jail, the benefits outweigh them by far.

So he gambled, he fought, he stole — and as he moved up in ranks, he had to do less of it. Over the course of his twenty-seven years though, he was caught many times and paid dearly for it. The first few times, his fingers were stomped: first his little finger, then his ring finger, his middle finger, his thumb, and finally his index. The whole left hand, and then the right. But, as in most cases, the guards didn't quite achieve the deterrence effect that was intended and they had to move to hammering and eventually the removal of the little and ring fingers on his left hand. Fingers are believed to be the last thing inmates care about, but as we see far too often, not even those are worth anything to hopeless inmates constantly reminded of their worthlessness, and they are surely not worth more than the chance to hold a star for a short while. The great irony few people perceive in all this is that with injured or missing fingers, it becomes virtually impossible to hold a star tightly enough to shine. Spinning, however, becomes unbelievably easy since it requires a looser grip."

(Blackout)

Scene 4

(After a short blackout, with the set unchanged, DREAMER continues)

DREAMER: "In any case, after what still seems like an eternity, Eddie returned home, to a much different home, albeit, but he was free. An enormous gap had inevitably grown between him and his parents, but they all did their best. Seven years earlier, Chandni and I had bought the house next to Debbie and David's and we helped in any way we could. Still, Eddie had lost sight of life outside of jail while he was there and had not been thinking of the long-term consequences of his actions there on his life as a free man. With his fingers so damaged, he was useless: he could not shine at all and thus he had to rely on stars from his parents and from Chandni and I to get by. We had saved enough that it was no burden on us — especially with only one son and one grandson — but Eddie, he couldn't stand it. Every time we would give him some stars or pay for him, such a look of shame and embarrassment swept over his face. Here he was, a grown man, unable to survive by his own means, with nothing left to give to society. The looks given to him by neighbours and shiners were no consolation either: even though he always kept his hands in his pockets, they knew why he could not pay. What he didn't realize was that we had suffered much of the same hostility throughout his time in jail. We had, after all, brought up a criminal.

Although we had helped Eddie keep away from the spinners, the shame was so much that it pushed him back into fringe-walking. If there's one thing one learns in jail, it's crime, especially spinning and robbery, since one can practise those skills. But inmates always exchange best practises, as it were, on the other two Crimes as well. Thus, Eddie had become somewhat of expert and was sure that without anyone to snitch on him that he would be safe. And again, to a hopeless man, a little risk simply does not provide much deterrence."

Now by this point, the old guy's startin' to lose it a bit. But he was like 100 years old and practically crying. I didn't know what else to do but just to let him keep going.

"The only thing Eddie had overlooked was that the condemning looks people gave him were not just looks: they were manifestations of true suspicion, spite, hatred. Everyone knew Eddie had gone to jail, and they did not want to hear anything more. It was as if his release was a direct, premeditated attack on them, and they needed to protect themselves. It was the neighbours' innocuous-looking six-year-old son who saw Eddie on the fringes. He didn't grasp much of the situation, but he knew enough to conclude that his parents would be very proud of him for sharing this observation with them. It wasn't just his parents; when Eddie was sent back to jail, the young boy was heralded as a little hero by the whole city — even after Eddie took his life, his first day back..."

(Blackout)

Scene 5

(After a short blackout, with the set unchanged, DREAMER continues)

DREAMER: "If Debbie's parents' divorce was like losing part of her past, Eddie's death was like losing the entire future, all of our futures. We grieved, we wept, we wailed, we mourned. A few unexpected friends offered their support, but for the most part, we only had each other. We seriously considered leaving the country altogether; at the very least, we had to leave the neighbourhood to escape the indifference people threw at us like daggers. In end we opted to stay within the limits of the city; it was the only home any of us knew.

Perhaps because she had suffered the most throughout her life, Debbie was the first to truly recover. A couple of years after his death, she decided there was still reason to keep going. Blowing us all away with her new-found strength and determination, she worked tirelessly to convert part of our new house into a centre where people released from jail could come to learn how to re-integrate into a society that had long since abandoned them. She read every book there was on the topic, met with experts from all over, and pulled David along the way.

Having learned from an experience no one should ever have to suffer through, she knew that a few stars to get back on their feet were the least of her clients' needs. She was not going to let them join the slews of desperate people who had lost all their stars and been beguiled into working on the star-collecting machines in the hope of rebuilding their collection either. Of course that route is nothing more than an endless and hazardous dead-end: one breaks one's back and stiffens one's hands working endless hours on huge machines only to receive such a small enough fraction of the captured stars to get them through another day and keep them coming back.

No, Debbie taught them how to shine again, to shine with damaged or missing fingers. She even taught the fingerless to clasp stars with their palms! In fact, if you peek out the window here, you'll see an older woman holding up a star at the corner of the street. She was one of the first people they helped and if you look very closely, you can see her fingerless left hand."

So I got up, went over to the window and just caught a glimpse of this old lady holding up the brightest, sparkling ball of light you can ever imagine. But then, even though I tried to fight it, I slowly *(house lights gradually come on and reach their max at the end of the sentence)* started to wake up to the sun shining right in my face through a crack in the curtain.

END

(House lights stay on and stage lights quickly go off and back on for the bow)

Author's Note – by Nicholas Dubé

The statistics on incarceration in the USA are staggering. That country incarcerates more people (2.3 million as of early 2008) at a higher rate (over one in every 100 adults) than any other country in the world (Pew Centre on the States, *One in 100: Behind Bars in America*). Neither the significantly more populous People's Republic of China with 1.5 million inmates (Pew Centre) nor the 36 largest European countries with 1.8 million inmates (various years) (Pew Centre) come anywhere near rivalling the staggering number of persons behind bars in the USA.

While studying at The American University in Washington, DC in 2007-2008 with the support of the Killam Fellowships Program, I had the opportunity to take a course on this phenomenon with an innovative and inspiring professor, Dr. Robert Johnson. As a final project for this class, *Lucky Stars* attempts to provide a creative analysis of the effects of a justice system focused on punishment rather than rehabilitation, while including some particulars of the US American system. The themes of guilt and forgiveness were no doubt also influenced by my concurrent studies in German.

"Forgiveness does not change the past but it does enlarge the future."
-Paul Boese