

SWING AMONG THE STARS

Philip Braithwaite

A young MAN and WOMAN are standing in an airport for spaceships. The sound of the rockets powering up and announcements through loudspeakers in the background.

We are decades into the future, and they're both under a great deal of strain, because this is the WOMAN's send-off to Mars, while the MAN remains on Earth.

WOMAN: That's your third coffee.

MAN: I'm not the one boarding.

WOMAN looks confused.

WOMAN: Are you not allowed to drink coffee if you're boarding?

MAN: Just thinking: you'll need the toilet.

WOMAN: Ah!... Well, my bladder's not as weak as yours.

MAN: 'Course not. They don't send weak-bladdered girls out *there*.

WOMAN: Exactly.

She laughs. They do little things like straighten each other's clothes out.

MAN: I heard this old story. This is ages ago. Before boarding a space flight, astronauts would go for one last piss before they reached the ship. Like, on the drive there, they'd all get out of the truck and unbutton. It was a kind of ritual. Then it became harder when more and more women started boarding flights, because, well...

He gestures towards the WOMAN's crotch.

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WOMAN: Different architecture.

A short laugh.

MAN: Is it true?

She shrugs.

WOMAN: Don't know. That was so long ago.

She laughs, with a hint of a mocking tone.

MAN: What?

WOMAN: Just... “astronauts.” It’s so quaint. They haven’t used that word for years.

MAN gets offended.

MAN, *put out*: Sorry.

WOMAN: Oh no—it’s not—

MAN: I don’t know the ins and outs of space travel—

WOMAN: It’s OK.

MAN: I’ll just stay down here on philistine Earth.

WOMAN: Come on, it’s not like that!

Pause. Neither knows what to say. MAN starts singing.

MAN: Fly me to the moon
Let me swing among those stars...

WOMAN: Let me see what spring is like
On Jupiter and Mars...
It’s like... our song.

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MAN: Soon you’ll know.
What spring is like.
On Mars anyway.

WOMAN suddenly looks overcome with sorrow.

WOMAN: I won’t go. I’ll stay.

MAN: What? You’re about to board!

WOMAN: I’ll stay here with you.

MAN: This is once in a lifetime stuff. You’re going to Mars! You’re gonna terraform the planet! You’ve been hand-picked for the ninth colony!

WOMAN: My head’s spinning!

MAN: There was a time—get this—people didn’t have to live under domes! You could actually see the sky! With your own eyes, I mean, not

through a visor. So you set up Mars for the future. It—it's noble. Not like the old days, when it was a one-way, I mean—And who knows? Maybe one day we can go back, and maybe even settle there?

Pause.

WOMAN: Listen—

MAN: It's three years. And when you come back we'll be set for life.

WOMAN: I—but—

MAN: Early pension payment! You'll be able to kick back—

WOMAN: Listen, I—

MAN: Then we think about having kids, and—

WOMAN, *blurting out*: I'm not coming back!

MAN is transfixed. He doesn't know how to respond.

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WOMAN: They sat us down, said they'd changed their thinking.

They said geomatic engineers are the most highly sought-after group, and if they're gonna pay to fly us up there and give us everything we need, and, and spend all this money on our training and... we have to sign a permanent contract. If we can't do that we had to leave there and then. (*pause*) I don't know: they put all this pressure on us. They rattled on about it being the most significant event in the history of humanity and, and a great privilege and we'd be making history and, and we had to put aside our personal feelings, and... I didn't know what else to do. It was either that or...

MAN is still transfixed. He shakes his coffee cup.

MAN, *blank, in reference to coffee*: I... I've run out... get... need to get more.

WOMAN: They... they've set up a support group.

MAN, *under his breath*: That or stay with me. Hmm?

WOMAN: They've set up a group for, for spouses of the Mars-9 team. You can go there. Talk to other spouses.

MAN, *sarcastic, due to being shell-shocked*: Ah. Well, that's nice. That'll be nice.

WOMAN: Listen, don't be—

MAN: How, uh... thing is... how long have you known about this?

Pause. WOMAN doesn't know how to say it.

WOMAN: They told us Monday.

MAN nods, unable to believe what he's hearing.

MAN: Mmm-hmm. So... a week, then? You had all week to tell me?

Pause.

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WOMAN: I didn't know how to. I'm sorry!

ANNOUNCEMENT: All engineers boarding flight 584 to Mars, please make your way to Boarding Gate 3.

MAN adopts a mock-easygoing persona.

MAN, *sarcastic*: Now you will write, won't you?

WOMAN: Please don't be—

MAN suddenly lets out his feelings.

MAN: How am I s'posed to be? Huh?

WOMAN: I—I love—

MAN: No.

ANNOUNCEMENT: All engineers boarding flight 584 to Mars, please make your way to Boarding Gate 3.

She doesn't know what to say, so she just slowly walks off. When she's gone, MAN watches blankly and slowly and flatly sings the song.

MAN: Fly me to the moon
Let me swing among those stars...
Let me see what spring is like
On Jupiter and... and...

Overcome with emotion, he can't end the song and say the word "Mars." He just watches where she went blankly.

PHILIP BRAITHWAITE (New Zealand) is a playwright who enjoyed early success in his writing career when, shortly after graduating from university, he won the 2001 BBC World Service International Radio Playwriting Competition. Since then his work has been produced around the world, and he has won several awards for his work, including the Am New Zealand Play Award and the Robert Lord Award for Best Script.