

BlueShift

By John J King

A black dramedy about depression and time travel. As she takes her career and a new relationship to the next level, Martha is forced to confront the deep dark corners of her mind. And speaking of deep dark corners - what is going on in the attic?

Characters

MARTHA an astrophysics nerd with mental health issues. 32 years old, black.
DAMON her beau; graphic designer who wants to be drawing comics. 26, white.
JEAN a neighbor lady who likes tea, cross-stitching, and bridge. 70s, white.
MARTHA-19 “Young Black and Fabulous” meets “just jumped off a tall building.” 19.
MARTHA-42 Looks like she’s been drowned in a marsh for a week. Late 40’s, black.
CHERIE Interdimensional pancake tourist, Future-Style. Same actress as MARTHA-19.

Setting

Present day, sprawl outside of Boston, in limbo between suburban and rural.
A house that may as well be a skull. Stairs churn up to the attic: boxes, webs, duct work, dust, an antique trunk with brass fittings.
Above the roof, an ancient black oak looms like a scalpel.
Above all: stars, constellations, the greater universe.

[Text in brackets are asides, or under the breath.]

Scenes

SCENE ONE Late August; move-in day.
SCENE TWO Six weeks later; mid-October.
SCENE THREE A morning in January.
SCENE FOUR Stopped time, inside a Black Hole
SCENE FIVE Later that January day.
SCENE SIX A Saturday in Spring.

SCENE ONE

A single family home outside of Boston. Not close enough to be urban, nor far enough to be rural. How about Urbal? You can most certainly see the stars at night.

There is a salt marsh behind the house, and not much further is the ocean.

Above the house looms a huge, ancient black oak.

The house sprawls with moving boxes, wrapped furniture, and dust.

In the attic, a large antique trunk.

MARTHA hauls to the attic a load that is far too big for her: boxes of books, a sack of clothes slung across shoulders.

MARTHA

That's it! Mama cannot carry no more tonight. Whoop! Goddamn.

She drops her load and tries the light switch. No luck. She turns to the trunk. Is there a scratching sound coming from it? Or is that the tree scraping the roof? MARTHA blows off the lid: a dozen years of dust fogs the attic.

MARTHA

“And so she found a place to hide the bodies.”

MARTHA walks downstairs, and puts the beer in the fridge.

MARTHA

Damon! Bring the shelf! [I wanna put books away. Beer, Damon, Really?] Ugh, this won't be doing us a heap of good warm as piss.

MARTHA unpacks a lock box.

MARTHA

And you, old friend: You ought to go somewhere special, and secret...

DAMON hauls a bookshelf in. MARTHA quickly and poorly hides the lock box.

DAMON
Martha? You on break?

MARTHA
I'm taking my union five.

DAMON
I could use a hand.

MARTHA *slow claps.* DAMON *hauls the shelves to the den.*

DAMON
That's cold.

MARTHA
Hulk that shelf, baby!

DAMON
That is the whole truck in the bag.

MARTHA
With one hour to spare. High five. Now we unpack.

DAMON
All I want is Chinese and a beer.

MARTHA
Not till we make a little room. We are going to need a bigger boat.

DAMON
Nah. We'll get out the Crisco, squeeze it all in. We have the whole attic too.

MARTHA
There's no light up there.

DAMON
I can make light happen.

MARTHA
That is hot. You want to role play?

DAMON
The electrician and the housewife?

MARTHA
I am no one's housewife. I put the Ass in Astrophysicist, thank you. This den looks like a liver. I want to paint. You don't mind a little color, right?

DAMON
You know I like some color, baby.

MARTHA
You want a little color right now?

DAMON
I do, but I really need to get that truck back.

MARTHA
I can take it in the morning.

DAMON
That's an extra twenty bucks.

MARTHA
OK you did not just cock block me for a Jackson. Fine. Take the truck. I will unpack.

MARTHA clears the bed and makes paths in the den.

MARTHA
Of course, we'd be sitting fat and happy by now if we got the movers I wanted. Instead we been at this 10 hours – IN AUGUST – with NO AC – and don't even get me started on why no one north of Nashville ever heard of central air – but I will clear off your boudoir, not for love, but so you can lay your head upon a baby-soft pillow.

DAMON
You are a dick.

MARTHA
You love me. Come on.

DAMON
What are we doing?

MARTHA
I will pay the twenty dollars my damn self to take advantage of a porch right now.

DAMON grabs a beer. They go to the porch.

DAMON
You don't mind me drinking, do you?

MARTHA
Never was a beer gal. Although...since I am trying to stay off the sauce, it might be best if you did not bring any more into the house.

DAMON

Oh. Right. Sorry.

MARTHA

Do not sweat it. It is a new rule. Just don't buy any more. Besides, you don't mind my smoking, right?

MARTHA *lights a cigarette.*

DAMON

You quit!

MARTHA

I sure did.

DAMON

But we were going to quit together. Is that a clove?

MARTHA

Want one, honey bun?

DAMON

Split it with me?

MARTHA

Welcome home, D. We done good.

DAMON

Raymond done good.

MARTHA

Yeah. Cheers to Grandpa Ray.

They "clink" their cigarette and beer.

MARTHA

This is legit country out here. There are actual crickets.

DAMON

Having regrets?

MARTHA

Reminds me of home.

DAMON

Quiet – No distractions.

MARTHA
No distractions, no attractions...

DAMON
The train to the city is a 10-minute walk.

MARTHA
And on the way there you pass a psychic in a trailer.

DAMON
You can see the stars?

MARTHA
That is nice.

Silence.

DAMON
What's up? You went blue all of a sudden.

MARTHA
Not blue. Just thinking. I am going to set up my nook in the kitchen.

DAMON
The kitchen?

MARTHA
Do you have a better place in mind?

DAMON
Plenty of room in the attic.

MARTHA
Hell, no!

DAMON
Hear me out. We get you a desk. Some lamps – BOOM! Martha's Nook –

MARTHA
The place gives me the willies. It is damp. It is gross. I want the kitchen.
As a temporary solution?

DAMON
Temporary like you'll move every night so we can eat?

MARTHA
You don't get any more of my cigarettes. Did you see the trunk up there? Big antique chest:
Dark wood with brass fittings.

What is in it?
DAMON

It is locked.
MARTHA

Don't mess, Pandora.
DAMON

Don't you want to know what's inside?
MARTHA

No. Sounds haunted.
DAMON

Which is why I don't want to be up in the attic with it.
MARTHA

OK. We'll get rid of it, hide it.
DAMON

How about you, daddio. New home, new life: what is on your wishlist?
MARTHA

I am a simple man, with simple needs –
DAMON

Spill.
MARTHA

I want to set up a work area for me – I want to knock out this comic by the new year.
DAMON

The one with the mutant care bears?
MARTHA

They are people, who mutate into bear-like creatures, and Mutants are making a comeback.
DAMON

So, I work space. I hear there's a great work space in the attic.
MARTHA

We can share.
DAMON

You gonna finish by New Year? That's ambitious.
MARTHA

I dream big.

DAMON

What else, dreamer?

MARTHA

Don't laugh.

DAMON

Come on.

MARTHA

I want a garden in the yard.

DAMON

Gahden in the Yahd – your Boston is spilling.

MARTHA

Build a raised bed and grow everything. We'll eat fresh every day.

DAMON

You know I don't play in dirt.

MARTHA

You don't have to play in dirt, you just have to cook it.

DAMON

I'm cooking for you now?

MARTHA

That's how this works, right? I provide the home and food, you cook it and make babies. Spinach in the shade. Peppers and tomatoes over where the sun hits all day.

DAMON

Jesus. Man's got farmer dreams.

MARTHA

Grandpa Ray had an awesome garden. We would play croquet and Gran would come holler out: "Order up! I need four carrots, a cucumber, and fist full of rhubarb!"

DAMON

Fist full of rhubarb.

MARTHA

Grandpa called her his Rhubahb. "Sometimes she's tart, but give her some sugar, she makes the sweetest pie." He had that thick Brooklyn accent. Rhubahb!

MARTHA
 “Rhubahb!”

DAMON
 Just meant he loved her. That’s what I want. A big garden in our big yard.

MARTHA
 You’re going to make some lucky woman very happy one day.

DAMON
 I hope so. And a tire swing.

MARTHA
 On that tree? No: a Hammock. That tree is like God.

DAMON
 It’ll be perfect for a little boy, running around climbing everything?

MARTHA
 Little boy?

DAMON
 Pipe dream; someday.

MARTHA
 Where did this little boy come from?

DAMON
 You want me to show you where babies come from?

DAMON *kisses* MARTHA.

MARTHA
 No. You are cut off – no more beer and no more little boys. Back to work.

DAMON
 I love you.

MARTHA
 Rhubahb.

DAMON
 I must pee.

They go inside. He pees but they keep talking

MARTHA

Shut the door, Damon! Dang.

DAMON

We live together: We shall have no secrets.

MARTHA

This is what I get for living in sin with a man-child.

DAMON

I still might make an honest woman of you one of these days.

MARTHA

I dare you. Anyone ever tell you, you have a huge collection of books?

DAMON

That's what she said.

MARTHA

I want a new bookshelf, that isn't yours or mine, but ours.

DAMON

What's this lock box?

MARTHA

Don't touch that. That's my private lady things.

DAMON

I thought you liked when I touch your lady box.

MARTHA

You bout to get locked outta my box for a minute. I am serious, Damon. Give it back.

DAMON *hands over the lock box.*

MARTHA

I am putting this in the closet, in the deepest depths behind – OH MY GOD! SPIDER! Kill it!

DAMON

“You want me to put the hammer down?”

DAMON *whacks at the spider with a hammer.*

MARTHA

Jesus, Damon, careful!

DAMON

That creature will not bother you again.

MARTHA
That was a little over the top, Thor.

DAMON
But sexy?

MARTHA
Thank you for protecting me, god of thunder. This is now my personal closet. No boys allowed.
She puts the lock box in the closet.

DAMON
I don't think that's—

MARTHA
Never. Swear.

DAMON
I swear my loyal oath.

MARTHA
You may kiss my hand.

DAMON
It is my honor, beauty.

MARTHA
You may carry me to bed.

DAMON
My lady?

MARTHA
Your good deeds have earned you my flower.
DAMON picks her up.

DAMON
Nothing says Viking love-god like screwing a lady who's been sweating for 12 hours without a bath.
DAMON carries her towards bed.

MARTHA
Wait! Hold on!

DAMON
What's wrong?

Let me get us some mood lighting.

MARTHA

MARTHA *turns off the lights.*

I want to see you.

DAMON

Learn to read braille, Son.

MARTHA

They begin love. Hours pass and the night becomes still.

The trunk in the attic emits an eerie light; scratching sounds grow, and reverberate.

Something falls from the sky and tears through the roof, exploding dust and debris across the attic, and the Trunk flips open. From inside, MARTHA-19 stands. She is Young Black and Fabulous, if a little beat: her hair shoots straight up as if she is in free-fall; she has gashes and bruises from impact; maybe a limb is bent out of shape. Her nails are long and gnarly claws she scrapes against the wall. She gathers herself into a corner and stands in the shadows.

Damon? What is that? Someone's on the roof!

MARTHA

Probably just an animal.

DAMON

Go check!

MARTHA

I'm not going out there if someone is –

DAMON

Shhh! Listen! I'm going to call 911.

MARTHA

No – don't call. We don't know what –

DAMON

MARTHA

OK I'm dialing 9, 1, and then I'll have my thumb on the 1.

DAMON goes to the porch and explores the roof, sweeping the flashlight. MARTHA grabs a long knife from the kitchen.

MARTHA

Damon! Be safe! What do you see?

DAMON

Jesus!

MARTHA

What is it? Should I push the 1? Or not?

DAMON

Come here.

MARTHA

NO!

DAMON

There's no one here. Just come look! There's a hole in the roof.

MARTHA

What do you mean there's a hole in the roof?

DAMON

I mean there's a three-foot tear in the roof where some *thing* made a nest.

MARTHA

What thing?

DAMON

Raccoons?

MARTHA

NO: I heard a person.

DAMON

A big raccoon?

MARTHA

Damon, be sensible!

DAMON

Let's go back to bed. Jesus – what's with the machete?

I'm protecting us!

MARTHA

That's a bread knife, Martha.

DAMON

I thought you said you inspected this place!

MARTHA

I guess I missed the roof.

DAMON

And the lights in the attic.

MARTHA

The hole looks new. Probably just raccoons getting in and tearing up the wiring.

DAMON

Fucking creepers.

MARTHA

There's nothing to worry about tonight. Let's just get back to bed.

DAMON

I can't sleep with a creature crawling all over our house!

MARTHA

Some of us have to work in the morning, Martha! We can keep the flashlight and the phone next to us.

DAMON

OK.

MARTHA

THEY sit in the dark.

MARTHA

Damon can I smoke? I'll blow it out the window.

DAMON

If it'll make you feel better. I did not take you for such a scairdy cat.

MARTHA

I'm not. Just some things. Spiders and noises. You don't get scared?

DAMON

"Always poop in the morning, so nothing can scare the shit out of you."

Sage advice.

MARTHA

Raymond used to tell me that.

DAMON

Tell me a joke.

MARTHA

DAMON

A chicken and an egg are in bed, just – unh! – going at it. The chicken gives this loud long Squaaaaaaaawwk-Aaaaaahhh. The eggs rolls off the chicken and says “I guess that answers THAT question.”

THEY might dissolve in a fit of exhausted giggles.

You will make a good father.

MARTHA

You think so?

DAMON

Why – you don’t?

MARTHA

I don’t know. Ray raised me, mostly. I feel like I never learned what a father was supposed to be.

DAMON

You’d be great.

MARTHA

Is that something we should think about?

DAMON

No. I didn’t go poop yet. Is that the waves?

MARTHA

THEY listen.

King tide. Big moon tonight.

DAMON

Tell me about the moon.

MARTHA

DAMON

You want me to tell a astrophysics student about the moon?

MARTHA

You know all the things from designing the video. It's nice when you tell me.

DAMON

The moon reflects the light of the sun. And the light from the sun takes 8 minutes to reach the moon, and then another 1.5 seconds to bounce off the moon down to your pretty eyes.

MARTHA

So that moonlight is 8 minutes old.

DAMON

Eight minutes and one-point-five seconds.

MARTHA

And everything else is further away?

DAMON

You see that star? The orange one. That's –

MARTHA

Arcturus.

DAMON

Yep. Arcturus is thirty-seven light years away.

MARTHA

So the light we see right now started travelling 37 years ago.

DAMON

Older than you, grandma.

MARTHA

Keep that lip up, I'll hide you like a grandma.

DAMON

Everything in the universe is lit by the past. That's why time is just some construct, because we're constantly looking at the present, lit by the past, throwing shadows of the future.

MARTHA

You're like so high right now. You got those 25-year-old puppy dog, big ideas eyes. And I'm here like "where my next pancakes coming from?"

THEY *listen to the night sounds.*

MARTHA

Pancakes...

DAMON
You hungry?

MARTHA
No. I might use that as a metaphor. Black holes and pancakes.

DAMON
I supposed IHOP is a kind of black hole.

MARTHA
You hear of the Multiverse?

DAMON
The Avengers, sure.

MARTHA
Jackass. Most of the universe is unknowable: a secret we can't unlock. Dark energy, dark matter. One theory is that there are just parallel universes stacked on top of ours – we just can't see them – universe stacked on parallel universe. Like pancakes.

DAMON
Now who's high?

MARTHA
Like right now, we in the universe where you don't get any play.

DAMON
I don't like that universe.

MARTHA
Then you should watch that mouth. You want any of these pancakes you better bring the butter.

DAMON
You would make a good mom, too.

MARTHA
Don't start that. That's not butter that's vegemite.

DAMON
Our kids would be very pretty.

MARTHA
mmm hmm. They would.

DAMON
It's just a daydream.

MARTHA

Too late at night and dark for daydreams.

DAMON

“The conversations you have in the dark are the most important ones you will have.”

MARTHA

More sage advice from grandpa Ray?

DAMON

I just made that one up. Sounds legit though.

MARTHA

Some things should stay in the dark and never come out.

DAMON

Did I, um. Are you upset?

MARTHA

Go to bed.

DAMON

Martha: I love you.

MARTHA

Rhubahb...

In the attic, MARTHA-19 creeps out of the shadows, scraping the walls and playing in ripped-up insulation. She chews the wiring, and receives a shock that turns her on. She hums and dances softly across the attic, singing Nina Simone's DON'T LET ME BE MISUNDERSTOOD. This is the freakiest cover you ever heard.

MARTHA

Damon, you hear that?

DAMON snores. MARTHA takes the flashlight and Knife to the attic. In the shadows she can barely see MARTHA-19.

MARTHA-19

Baby, You understand me now, if sometimes you see that I'm mad.
 Don't you know no one alive can always be an angel.
 When everything goes wrong you see some bad.
 But I'm just a soul whose intentions are good.
 Oh lord, please don't let me be misunderstood.

MARTHA *runs downstairs, breathing heavy. She repeats to herself a prayer, almost chanting:*

MARTHA

Keep walking...keep walking...keep walking...

MARTHA *sees DAMON'S beer bottle in the sink. She tips it back so the last drops drip onto her tongue. The scraping sounds quiet. MARTHA-19 recedes into shadows. MARTHA goes to bed.*

MARTHA

Damon? Baby. We gotta patch that hole.

DAMON

Ok, Martha. Of course I will.

SCENE TWO

In the sky, the constellations rotate: Fall. The great Black Oak is vibrant in its dying.

Morning, some weeks later.

DAMON *works on the roof: stretching a tarp across the hole and hammering it taut.*

In the den, MARTHA practices a new Planetarium Presentation: images flash against the wall. As she does so, she unpacks: Boxes disappear. Rooms take shape. She tapes color samples to walls. Hangs a photo or painting.

MARTHA-19 *prowls with malicious intent.*

MARTHA

Black Holes and Revolutions. Welcome to the Multiverse, students. No, this isn't the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Still, the idea is the same: multiple dimensions overlapping and interacting with each other, sometimes intersecting.

True Detective's Rust Cohle tells us "Time is a flat circle." What if he's right? What if we're living on a pancake, stacked on another pancake.

I call it Martha's Stack of Pancakes. Bear with me: Imagine a stack of flapjacks, one atop the other, touching. Occasionally two pancakes stick together with heat. And when you cut through, they blend and mix.

MARTHA (cont'd)

Two thirds of our known universe is Dark Energy. This is a fancy way of saying we have no clue what's going on. It's as if things are there, right next to us generating energy and gravity, but we cannot see them.

What if there were a way to grasp it? The black hole is the best potential candidate, an object with gravity so strong it warps the fabric of space-time.

How does it feel inside a black hole? Well for one, time is cancelled. The gravity of a black hole is so strong, you would be pulled to the center faster than the speed of light, but also continue falling forever.

One does not simply walk up to an Event Horizon. Reality splits in two. Two pancakes? Two dimensions, two universes? We don't know. No one has yet reported back – once you go Black Hole, you never go Back Hole.

But maybe this amount of energy cuts through from one pancake to the next.

What if other moments could rend space-time? Moments of emotional energy; spiritual energy? A death. A choice to leave, or stay. Each fork in the road breaks off into a new universe. In one you were born, in another you were not. In one you came here today, in another, you played hooky. Millions and millions of universes, stacking upon each other, invisible to each other, generating dark energy that can be sensed, but not seen.

A stack of a billion pancakes. Welcome: To the Yummyverse.

*When she is done, the house is in shape. Settled.
DAMON has come down from the roof.*