

# Good-bye from SILVE

## A 10-minute play by David K. Farkas

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### ***Setting:***

A large room at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, that is used for special occasions.

### ***Characters:***

**Skip Wilson:** A NASA engineer.

**George:** A NASA engineer.

**Martha:** George's wife, a homemaker.

**Colonel Ingram:** High-level NASA official. (Any gender or sexual orientation.)

**Skip Wilson:** As dancer.

**SILVE:** As dancer.

### ***Suggested minimum casting:***

Colonel Ingram/George Bedford

Skip Wilson, as actor

SILVE as dancer

Skip Wilson as dancer

Martha

### **[Scene 1]**

COLONEL INGRAM stands at a podium, enjoying the limelight. He speaks in a folksy Southern or Texas accent.

**COLONEL INGRAM:** This is surely the day to recognize Henry "Skip" Wilson (*Gestures to SKIP in the audience.*) Skip joined NASA in 1975, directly out of graduate school, and he was assigned to the Surface-Intensive Luminosity VLBI Exploration, known to us all as Project SILVE.

Young SKIP, as dancer, enters. The SILVE spacecraft, as dancer, enters. To some kind of ethereal soundscape, they perform an interpretive pas de deux based on COLONEL INGRAM'S

monologue. SILVE orbits around SKIP, but SKIP can join her at special moments, including the mention of the software patch that saves her. They pause whenever the audience's attention should be entirely on COLONEL INGRAM. SILVE'S dance style changes as she leaves the solar system for interstellar space. Gradually, SILVE appears more infirm, and SKIP shows concern and then grief. Later, SILVE appears to glide lifelessly into the void.

**COLONEL INGRAM:** Skip was part of the SILVE launch team in 1977, and he worked on telemetry for the Jupiter and Saturn fly-bys. In 1984, as Operations Manager, Skip managed the extension of SILVE's initial mission to conduct the Uranus and Neptune fly-bys, using the velocity assist from Saturn's gravitational field. (*Beat.*) We all thought SILVE was done for in 1987 when her Articulation Control System failed. But Skip engineered one of the largest and most complex software patches in the history of space exploration, and he brought SILVE back online. (*Beat.*) In 2013, SILVE's flight path took her through the heliosphere and into interstellar space, where she continued to send back data on electron density and solar wind. As new engineers replaced those who rolled off the project or retired, Skip stood out as the only original member of the project team. (*Beat.*) Two years ago, SILVE's data stream became unreliable, and no further experiments could be conducted. But Skip continued to monitor SILVE's voyage and transmit routine system commands. (*Beat.*) We had our last measurable signals from SILVE on May 13. We can still transmit, but we don't know if she is listening, and we're not likely to find out. So, the decision was made to formally close down the project, and Skip decided to coordinate the end of the project with his own retirement from NASA. (*Beat.*) SILVE has been in space for 43 years, longer than any other artifact from Earth. Skip and SILVE have been true partners all this time. (*Chuckling.*) I think Skip hears SILVE murmuring to him in his sleep.

SILVE, as dancer, and SKIP, as dancer, exit.

**COLONEL INGRAM:** SILVE is expected to reach the Oort Cloud in about 300 years. If there is any intelligent life out there, and if they recover SILVE, they will find a special golden data disk that includes greetings in 86 languages, the works of William Shakespeare, and the music of Chuck Berry.

SILVE dances across the stage to Chuck Berry-like rock and roll chords.

**COLONEL INGRAM:** We'd be happy to assign Skip to a current project, but he said no. He's been with SILVE his entire career. I guess this old dog (*Gestures again to SKIP.*) is just not in the mood to learn new tricks. I asked Skip if he'd care to come up to the podium to make a few remarks, but he declined. You all know, Skip's a quiet guy, not into speechifying, like yours truly. Now that he's retired, Skip plans to spend his well-earned leisure time fishing on the Gulf Coast. (*Beat.*) So, this luncheon marks the official termination of the Surface-Intensive Luminosity VLBI Project—and Skip Wilson's retirement. (*Raises a glass.*) You all know we can't serve alcohol on the JPL campus. But, join with me in toasting Skip Wilson and SILVE—"To a job well done!"

COLONEL INGRAM solicits applause from the luncheon [theater] audience. Then he backs upstage left or right, still clapping and facing the audience. INGRAM can become GEORGE by changing his costume in full view of the audience. Carrying a sport jacket and his briefcase, SKIP joins GEORGE, who will now speak with a more neutral accent. They walk slowly across the stage.

**GEORGE:** Well, it was a great event. You must admit the Colonel did a good job up at the podium.

**SKIP:** Yes, he did.

**GEORGE:** I didn't know you had ideas about fishing. I don't remember you mentioning that. I don't remember you ever *going* fishing.

**SKIP:** No, Ingram said he needed to put something about my retirement in his speech, so I said "fishing." No one is going to notice or care if I go fishing or not.

**GEORGE:** Well, you're going to have to figure out something.

**SKIP:** I guess so.

**GEORGE:** OK, tomorrow 6:30. We'll have happy hour and then dinner. It won't be too hot, so we'll do dinner on the patio. Martha is eager to see you.

**SKIP:** Yes, tomorrow. 6:30. See you then, George.

**GEORGE:** Yessiree.

**SKIP:** And, George. Thanks for being my really good friend all these years. Thanks for your support with SILVE. You know, especially in these last few years. And just thanks, in general.

**GEORGE:** Sure, Skip.

They exit.

## **[Scene 2]**

The set is split. On one side GEORGE is seated at his patio dining set. On the other side, SKIP is stretched out on a shabby old chaise lounge with a big bottle of beer and an open bottle of large white pills.

Action.

GEORGE is idly scrolling on a tablet. SKIP tips the pill bottle and swallows a large handful of pills. He washes them down with his beer.

**MARTHA:** It's 7:00.

**GEORGE:** So.

**MARTHA:** Well, it's not like Skip to be late. He lives on his watch.

**GEORGE:** Well, maybe not any more, now that he's retired.

**MARTHA:** Well, you can text him.

**GEORGE:** OK.

GEORGE pulls out his smartphone and types out a text. Again, SKIP tips the pill bottle, swallows a large handful of pills, and washes them down with his beer. His smartphone beeps. He looks at it, types a return text, and stares off into the distance.

**GEORGE:** He says he's running late. He'll be here in 20 minutes.

**MARTHA:** OK.

MARTHA exits. Then she returns and puts something else on the table and exits again. After a short while (which represents 30 minutes), MARTHA returns.

**MARTHA:** It's after 7:30. Give Skip a call. Let's find out what's keeping him.

GEORGE makes the call. SKIP'S smartphone signals an incoming call.

**SKIP:** Hello, George.

**GEORGE:** Skip, you OK?

**SKIP:** Yes, I am.

**GEORGE:** What are you doing?

SILVE, as dancer, and SKIP, as dancer, enter together and observe SKIP, who is unaware of them. As SKIP delivers this next speech, we begin to see the effects of the sedatives. His voice is still loud enough, but his speech has become slurred.

**SKIP:** I'm taking a look at the solar system. Well, the part I can see from my backyard, which, right at the moment, is just the sun.

SILVE, as dancer, and SKIP, as dancer, again to ethereal music, resume their interpretive dance, mostly on SKIP'S portion of the stage or on the periphery of the entire stage. This might include locking arms tightly and spinning together as a single entity sailing through space. The dialogue can be paused to allow adequate time for the dance episode.

**SKIP:** But, in my *mind*, I'm looking at the whole damn cosmos. I'm out there riding with SILVE. Keepin' her company, so to speak.

**GEORGE:** Skip. What are you saying? Would you repeat some of that?

**SKIP:** You're not copying too well? Well, I guess my transmissions are starting to fail. I'm drifting pretty far away from things. I've been on an outbound orbit for a good while now, and this evening I've intersected SILVE'S flight path. She's just a thousand meters ahead of me. We're off to see the wizard.

**MARTHA:** What's with Skip?

The dancing may be paused here because the audience is attending to down-to-earth events rather than to SKIP'S imaginings of outer space.

**GEORGE:** You're drunk. You could have done that over here with Martha and me.

**SKIP:** No, I'm not drunk. What I've consumed—"ingested" as they say—I couldn't have done at your house.

**MARTHA:** Drunk?

**GEORGE:** Fuck! You can't do that, Skip! I'm coming over. No, I'm calling the EMTs.

**SKIP:** (*With his speech slurred.*) Don't do that, George. Please. You're my friend. You understand. I know you do.

**MARTHA:** For God's sake, George. What is happening?

**GEORGE:** Martha's gonna make the call. Then, I'm sticking with you on the phone.

**SKIP:** Sorry, Houston Control. EMTs—not an option. George, I have a Glock right here. I don't want to do it that way. That's a terrible way to leave things. I need you to promise me—no EMTs. Unless I can trust you, I'm gonna have to use the Glock. Let's just finish our little chat—OK, George?

**GEORGE:** You have no right to put this on me, Skip.

MARTHA grows continuously more agitated.

**SKIP:** Maybe I do. This one thing—so many years, George. Promise me. Make up some story when you need to.

**GEORGE:** (*Choking up.*) I . . . promise. But . . . Did you really need to do this?

SILVE, as dancer, and SKIP, as dancer, resume their interpretive dance. They gradually become deeply intimate, ecstatic, and triumphant.

**SKIP:** George, can you imagine me with a fishing rod and a tackle box? . . . You know, SILVE's still hummin' away, still talking to me. She's a sturdy old girl. Most of her solar panels are OK. Electronics good, just reduced voltage. She's too far away from all of you. But I'm right with her, George.

GEORGE is now aware of SILVE and SKIP, as dancers. MARTHA is not.

**GEORGE:** I know you are.

**MARTHA:** We should have guessed.

GEORGE stands, full of grief, and gives MARTHA a strong, fervent hug. MARTHA understands. GEORGE and MARTHA now gaze together at the ecstatic dance. SKIP becomes unconscious, perhaps dead.

The dancing continues for perhaps 15 seconds to allow the audience to register SKIP'S unconscious state.

**GEORGE:** Martha, maybe it was the right thing. At least he went out the way he wanted to.

SKIP comes to life, stands, and joyfully watches the dancers, who are aware of him. Everyone on stage is fully aware of one another. The mood is exuberant.

**MARTHA:** Yes, I hope it's a long, sweet ride with SILVE.

SILVE and SKIP, as dancers, dance themselves offstage as though seeking something new and exciting. MARTHA and GEORGE watch them and then embrace again.

***The End***