

## The Observation

On a clear moonless night in early September, with the sky full of stars and other celestial objects, Colin was jolted awake by a noise that sounded like a gunshot. It came from the direction of the retired professor's house. He sat upright in bed and listened for what might come next, but aside from an owl's hoot and the drone of a distant plane he heard only silence, as one might expect at four a.m. in the country.

Colin knew what rifles and shotguns sounded like since most of his neighbors fired them at stationary targets or gophers from time to time, but this sound was different. It was a loud crack like the split of a tree toppling to the ground. A semi-automatic pistol makes such a noise. He once stood by as one was fired into the head of a deer that had been injured in a collision with a pickup. He'd never before witnessed a creature die by bullet, and even though it was an act of mercy, the kill was unspeakably violent. The sound echoed in his head for days.

But why now, at four in the morning? And why from the professor's place?

Colin considered various possibilities, which made him more anxious, and rather than face insomnia for the next two hours until his alarm went off, he convinced himself there was nothing to fear. After all, there was quiet outside his window. No snapping twig, hideous laughter or deep breathing. There had to be a sensible explanation. A gun fell from a shelf, spontaneously discharging, causing no injury. He lay back down, shut his eyes and was soon back asleep. When he awoke, feeling refreshed, he showered, dressed and drank a double espresso. He also made Sam breakfast, which she'd awake to

later in the morning. He was on the road by seven, on time for work. He didn't think twice about the shot, assuming that's what he'd heard. But at approximately ten a.m. a colleague at work dropped a fat binder on the floor in the copy room, which made a loud splat, triggering a recollection of the moment at four a.m. when he sat up in bed with a racing heart, the image of a deer on the road, among other bad things, flashing in his head.

In the evening as they were cooking dinner, a half empty bottle of red wine on the table, Colin asked Sam, "Did you hear anything last night?"

"Like what?"

"Something. It sounded like a gunshot."

"No," she said. "I must have been asleep. I think my meds are working. I'm getting at least six hours now."

"It came from the professor's place. I think it was a semi-automatic pistol."

Sam stir-fried vegetables. "Maybe you heard a tree falling in the woods."

Colin drank more than his usual allotment, relaxed the taut expression that made him look years older and said, "Maybe you're right. It was a dead tree. There are so many, thanks to the oak blight. And they fall late at night of course. Let's move on." He raised the bottle of wine but Sam declined. Her new medication did not mix well with alcohol, according to the instruction sheet from the pharmacist.

"There's the new Van Gogh show at the Legion of Honor," Colin said. "Shall we go tomorrow? We haven't been to the city in such a long time. I think we're due."

“Sure,” Sam said. “We can go, if you wish”

“You sure?”

“I said so.”

They ate, cleaned up and, at Colin’s request, played a short Scrabble game that ended in a mutually agreed upon draw. They kissed each other lightly on the lips and went their separate ways to bed.

The next day, Saturday, Colin awoke early. He left the house while Sam was still asleep, hoping to put the mystery of the four-a.m.-shot-like sound behind him. That would clear the way for a carefree day in the city visiting the museum, and then perhaps dinner at a restaurant followed by a movie.

There was heavy fog scented with cypress and eucalyptus from the coast. Colin zipped up, pulled a wool hat over his ears and hurried up the driveway to Jedsen Lane, turning right and then right again onto the professor’s winding driveway.

“It’s a fairytale cottage,” Sam had said some ten years ago when they first encountered the professor’s house, set in a small meadow surrounded by redwoods. Leonard (the professor) and his wife Helen had invited them over for a summer barbecue. “They make such a sweet couple,” Sam said when they were walking home later that evening. “Like they were always meant to be together. Don’t you think?”

Helen died a year ago and the professor quickly withdrew from social life, all but ignoring condolences and invitations to get together. Nowadays they rarely saw him. Usually, it was only a chance encounter at the store or a drive-by sighting. He looked like

he'd aged ten years since the death.

Two does and three fawns now nibbled the dewy lawn in front of the house, a scene fit for a nature calendar. Colin advanced to the front door. Because it was too early to knock, assuming someone was inside, he strolled around the house looking for any irregularity.

On a patio near the back door, Colin spied the body. It was slumped to the side in a folding chair behind a large white optical telescope. Beside the telescope was a table upon which lay a notebook.

“Leonard?” Colin called. “Are you alright there, buddy?”

From a small head wound, a rivulet of dried blood snaked down the professor's face. The right arm was outstretched, fingers pointing to the handgun that lay on the pavement. Colin told himself to settle down, but his skin felt like it was on fire and his breathing was fast and shallow. He looked around to see what else could be surmised but the story seemed obvious. Suicide.

Colin listened to the light rain patting the soft forest floor all around the meadow. It sounded like an old-fashioned ticker tape. He turned and raced home.

Sam was sitting in the sofa bed, tucked under a comforter, reading one of the supermarket magazines she often picked up for distraction. “Where were you?” she asked as he walked inside. “It's cold out there.”

Colin's voice quivered. “I went to the professor's place. I think he's dead.”

Sam licked her thumb and flicked the page. “You're joking.”

“There's a pistol and a wound in the side of the head. We better call the sheriff, I

think.”

Sam dropped the magazine. “You’re not joking?”

“No.”

“But what if he’s not dead? What if he’s only wounded? You didn’t check for a pulse, did you? We need to rush there immediately.” Sam flung off the comforter and dashed around the house to get dressed. Donning a heavy parka, she said, “We’ll cut through the woods. It’s faster. Come on.”

They marched through a densely wooded tract that separated their property from the professor’s, Sam several steps ahead of Colin the entire way. When they arrived, a squirrel was perched on a table at the opposite end of the patio from the professor, jerking its tail like a whip and making guttural chirps as if to ward them off.

Colin pointed to the gun on the pavement and warned Sam to be careful.

She moved in close to the body and checked for a pulse. There was no beat and the skin was as cold as the metal bar of the patio chair. She noticed a sheet of paper pinned to the professor’s chest. She unhitched it and handed it to Colin. “I didn’t bring my reading glasses. Please read, hurry.”

Colin unfolded the note and said in a hushed voice, ““The moons of Neptune are shockingly clear right now.”” He put down the letter and drew a disturbed look. “Let’s call the sheriff, Sam. We can’t read this. Not now.”

“Just continue.”

Colin hesitated and took a deep breath: ““On the 5<sup>th</sup> of October, Triton, Neptune’s largest moon, occults a bright star. Whoever comes across my body, please take this

telescope to study the event. You may jot your findings in the notebook. If you wish to learn more about occultation, refer to the *Elements of Astronomy*, any edition will do. To Helen, my princess bride, I have left the earth's surface because I cannot bear another day without you. Cassiopeia, my love, is where we shall meet again. Godspeed, Leonard.”

Colin and Sam stared at each other and then Colin said, “I’m making that call right now. We have to.”

“Let’s try to make sense of things first.”

“There’s nothing to make sense of, Sam. This happened. That’s all there is.”

She looked around. The back door to the house was ajar. “Did you notice the door when you were here before?”

“No. And it doesn’t matter.”

She walked over to the door, knocked and leaned in. “Is anyone home?” Her voice reverberated inside the house.

“Don’t go in there,” Colin said.

Inside the house, everything was quiet, dark and meticulously clean. There was a scent of wood polish and the faint residue of fried food. On the kitchen table there were two crystal flute glasses, a bottle of champagne and a photo of Leonard and Helen. They were dressed in formal attire, young enough to be in their early thirties. Sam sat down, listening to the click of the wall clock and the soft whirl of the fridge. Outside, she also heard Colin’s pressured voice.

“Yes, Officer,” Colin said on the phone. “No, we’re not in any danger. No, he’s not breathing. No, we won’t touch a thing.”

Sam studied the photo, wondering why Leonard and Helen were dressed to the hilt. They were in love, for starters. She took a few minutes to think about the life they must have lived—places traveled, movies watched, beds shared. How many times did they make love? Who used the bathroom first in the morning? What was their favorite restaurant? The items on the table reminded her of an altar. She wondered if the professor had said a prayer before he went outside to shoot himself. She was about to explore the rest of the house but felt a sudden chill in her body. She still heard Colin's voice outside, sounding distant and muffled. This was not a place she belonged, she thought.

Back outside, the fog showed little sign of lifting and the patter of rain was more intense. Colin stood at the edge of the driveway with his hands in his pockets. Sam felt an urge to stand next to the body.

“Leave him alone, Sam,” Colin said. “The cops will be here any minute.”

She looked at the professor. He had a well-trimmed beard, thin but stylish hair, high cheekbones and blue unblinking eyes—a peaceful expression, as if death had wiped away the grief that had plagued him this past year. In any other context the head wound could have been something minor, a cut from a stray branch while taking a walk in the woods. “What do you think is in the notebook?” she asked.

“I don't know and I'd leave it alone,” Colin said.

It was one of those generic composition books with a black and white speckled cover, nothing to denote its purpose. Sam picked it up. Inside, there were detailed passages about astronomical events and other natural phenomena. Some entries were

philosophical, even poetic. *Tree frogs at night mating in vernal pools, heard as a chorus of thousands, like the countless stars above, each one waiting to be discovered.*

“Did you read any of this?” asked Sam.

“No. And you shouldn’t be reading it either.”

Sam continued reading while Colin paced in circles. “We need to get the truck,” she said abruptly, closing the notebook.

“I don’t see why. The police will be here any second.”

“For the telescope. It’s too big to carry ourselves.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Look, Colin. It’s obvious the professor wants us to take it. We’re supposed to follow his last and final request.”

They heard distant sirens that became louder, echoing in the ravines surrounding Jedsen Lane.

Two police cars and a bright red paramedic truck soon appeared. They screeched to a halt as if they were racing to prevent a tragedy yet to happen. Several officers rushed forward, followed by a paramedic team pushing a gurney.

A hulking sheriff’s deputy approached Colin and Sam and asked for ID cards.

“Mind telling me who you are and why you’re here?”

Colin told his story, beginning with the early morning gunshot the night before and ending with the discovery of the body this morning. “We’re pretty sure it’s a suicide, Officer.”



“How so?”

Colin produced the note. “It was pinned to his chest.”

The deputy grabbed the paper. “You weren’t supposed to take anything off the person of the deceased.” He wrinkled his brow as he stared at the letter and then directed Colin and Sam to another officer with a hand-held tape recorder who asked a slew of additional questions.

A black paneled van soon arrived and several officials with windbreakers emblazoned with *Coroner* jumped out. They photographed, measured and inspected the corpse and its surroundings. When done, they took it away and strung yellow crime tape around patio furniture and a rusty barbecue to isolate the spot where the professor had died.

Sam approached the deputy to ask for the letter back.

He waved her off and told her it was confidential evidence.

“But I need to read it again,” Sam said. “I want to be sure I have all the details.”

“Details for what?”

“An observation.”

The deputy flung up his hands.

She followed him around the property as he supervised the rest of the investigation until he finally relented and unfolded the letter for her perusal, keeping it from her hands. “After this,” he said, “you guys need to leave. We are just about finished here.”

Sam jotted down key words—*Neptune, Triton, Occultation, October 5<sup>th</sup>*—using the professor’s notebook for writing paper and then she turned away.

Colin caught up with her halfway up the driveway. The caravan of official cars soon passed them, their red and blue lights pulsating silently. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said with a stiff look. “What do you expect me to say? Of course I’m not okay. What about you?”

“We can buy a telescope if that’s what you want, but we can’t take the professor’s. It’s part of a crime scene now.”

Sam walked faster. “He made one last wish, Colin. We’re the stewards of that wish whether you like it or not. We have an *obligation*. Does that word resonate?”

“Yes, and so does *breaking the law*. We could end up in jail if we mess with anything.”

“I’m not going to explain if you’re not going to listen.”

When they arrived home, Sam jumped into their pickup and gunned the engine. “You’re welcome to come along if you like.”

“You’re not going back.”

“I’m leaving now.”

Colin looked around as if he feared they were being watched. “I’m not happy with this plan, Sam. What if the police left hidden surveillance cameras?”

“Knock it off.”

When they returned to the house, Colin stayed in the cab while Sam loaded the

telescope onto the bed of the truck. It was much lighter than expected and easily stowed, along with its tripod. Once she was back inside the cab, she said, “I can’t understand why you’re this nervous. It’s making me nervous. I probably won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

“And that’s my fault?”

“I’m just saying.”

“Taking property from a murder scene is illegal. That’s why I’m so nervous.”

“A murder scene?”

“Suicide is a form of murder.”

“That’s ridiculous, Colin.”

When they arrived home, Sam set up the telescope on their rear deck. There were nearby trees with overhanging branches, but she felt confident that the location would offer an unobstructed view of the night sky. She covered the telescope with a large beach towel and went inside.

Colin was eating toast and watching a movie on his computer. He barely looked up as she entered the kitchen.

“I’m sorry I snapped,” she said. “Can we talk?”

Colin closed his computer.

“We can go to the city if you like and still see that Van Gogh. Maybe it’s the best thing for us to do.”

“After what we’ve been through, you still want to go?”

Sam’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t know. First Helen with her cancer, and now

the professor with his suicide. Are we just supposed to carry on like nothing's happened?" She began to cry. They were heavy sobs, full of tears.

Colin embraced her.

"I've never seen a dead person before," she said, blowing her nose. "Let alone one with a bullet in the head. Have you?"

"There was that incident with the deer."

Sam leaned away. "Really, Colin—a deer?"

"It had a bullet in the head."

"Goodness. Let's just go before we say anything else."

They both cleaned up the kitchen, changed clothes and left for the city. Colin drove and Sam gazed out the window at the gray autumn sky. The only words in the air came from the radio, a random talk show.

The Legion of Honor museum was located on a height near the western tip of San Francisco, offering a view of the city, the Golden Gate Bridge and much of the bay. Bushels of fog rolled in from the sea. Monterey cypress trees swayed in the wind like giant claws.

Sam exited the truck and strolled to a lookout. "The sky is agitated, almost like boiling water. What do you think?"

"It's chilly," said Colin. "And we only have an hour before the museum closes."

Sam pressed her body against the cold concrete wall and took in the view. A

portion of the Golden Gate became visible, rust-red cables and tower extending out of the fog like a sinking ship. “Let’s forget the museum, Colin, and go for a walk. It will clear our heads.”

He looked to the museum and then at her. “I didn’t bring a hat.”

Sam noticed that he had the taut expression. His lips were shivering, turning slightly blue in the cold. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m just not right from this morning. Maybe we’re both not right. I’m sure of it. Let’s stick with the original plan. I promise to come around. Besides, we’ll get to see a *Starry Night*,” she mustered a smile.

“That one’s not on display,” said Colin. “We’d have to go to New York. Museum of Modern Art.”

They strolled up the steps to the well-lit museum. Colin paid the entrance fee. They went to the snack shop for hot chocolate before entering the galleries to view the paintings for the hour or so until the place closed.

Over the next week, Colin did his best to forget the incident with the professor. In his free time he watched comedy shows on his computer and in the evenings added a couple of beers to his routine, scaling back on wine. This lifted his spirits some more. He’d read that different drinks evoke different moods, for reasons yet to be explained by science. With each day the image of the dead body faded a degree. He was still jumpy, particularly with loud sounds, but he slept with the fan on to drown out any unexplainable noises coming from outside, or anywhere for that matter.

For her part, Sam went to the local public library, borrowing books and journals

on astronomy. From the Internet she downloaded an owner's manual for the make and model of the professor's telescope. She spent nights training the apparatus into the sky, making careful notes about planets, moons, stars and galaxies. She was able to squeeze five or six hours of restful sleep between dawn and noon, no longer needing the medication that her doctor had prescribed. Her dreams were naturally rich and full of images of space.

On Wednesday evening, five days after the discovery of the body, they received a phone call from a man named Tony, who lived in Los Angeles. He was a son from the professor's first wife. Helen, they learned, had been the second wife. Tony was the official administrator of the professor's estate. He had obtained their names from the police detectives who had already shut the professor's case, ruling the matter a simple suicide.

"Really sorry," Tony said. "None of us knew Lenny was so depressed after Helen died. He always sounded upbeat on the phone. Must have been awful to come across the body so."

"It was bad," said Colin, "but we're managing, day by day."

Sam was silent.

Tony did not refer to the telescope or notebook, or to the note that had been pinned to the professor's chest. He hinted there might be a memorial service within the coming month but provided no details. He added that the house would be soon put up for sale, once the estate cleared the probate court.

"Things should be peaceful over there until we get the green light to sell," said

Tony. "I've asked a security company to come by and rig the place with alarms. Evidently, Lenny never kept the door locked."

Early next morning, while Sam was still in bed and Colin was at work, workers installed alarms on the professor's property, which they tested. The shrill cacophony woke Sam from a deep slumber and she never fell back asleep.

October 5<sup>th</sup> came approximately one month after the professor's death. The morning was drenched in fog and drizzle, much like the day of his death. All day long Sam worried about the weather. Meteorologists listed the chance of a clear night sky at just fifty percent.

Sam made dinner that evening and burned half of what she cooked. She was distracted. They ate quietly, keeping their thoughts to themselves.

"Maybe I should take up painting," Colin said as they were sipping tea after the meal.

"Painting?"

"With acrylics. They don't smell like oils and they blend nicely on canvas or paper. I can set up a little studio in the den."

"That's nice," Sam said.

Colin rose to get a bag of store-bought cookies.

"You know what today is," she said.

"You mean the professor's letter."

She nodded. "Do you remember what it's about?"

"A few details."

Sam smiled. "Occultation's when an object in the foreground passes in front of a light source in the background. Based on how the light is blocked or refracted by the foreground object, you can learn various things. For example, you can learn whether the foreground object has an atmosphere. With really big telescopes, you can even calculate its density. Tonight, Triton, Neptune's largest moon, will occult a bright star in the constellation of Aquarius. The event will be complete just after two a.m. Astronomers around the world will be observing to learn what they can about the moon."

"All around the world?"

"I've been in touch with some of them by email. Last night I spoke to a guy in Spain."

"And what happens afterwards? Do we keep the telescope? Will you continue to make observations?"

"I haven't thought that far ahead."

"We could send the thing back to Tony, you know. I'm sure he'd pay for the freight."

"Let's not think about it. The point is to focus on tonight, to observe this event and describe what we see. That's what the professor wanted us to do. Do you think you can help?"

"I could try, certainly."



“One of us will look through the telescope and describe what they see, and the other will write down findings in the professor’s notebook. We’ll take turns. It may be a little confusing at first, and I might have to tinker with some filters, but I’ll explain everything.” Sam looked at Colin with wide imploring eyes.

He stirred his tea and munched a cookie. “Sure.”

“It will mean a lot.”

Colin began to clear away the dirty dishes. As he bent down to pick up items from her placemat he gently touched his lips to her hair. She had showered and the scent of shampoo was fresh and fragrant. He whispered, “I love you, Sam.” He glanced out the kitchen window into the darkening night, seeing their pale reflection in the paned glass. “Want a cookie?” he asked.

Sam stared silently ahead, still worrying about the weather. Their chance of success tonight was fifty percent. What did that mean? She turned to Colin, hoping for an answer.

“Colin?”

He had begun to wash dishes.

“What is it like to love me?” she asked.

**The End**