

Star Stuff

I.

“Every one of us is, in the cosmic perspective, precious. If a human disagrees with you, let him live. In a hundred billion galaxies, you will not find another.” –Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*

Ann knew that throwing most of the girls in her seventh grade class into a black hole would be problematic. First, there were the practical complications. Where would Ann get a space ship? They didn't live anywhere near NASA. Even if she did manage to somehow get a vessel, and herded her intended victims on board, how would she pilot it? She didn't even have a license. She couldn't drive herself to the mall, let alone to the nearest black hole 30,000 light years away.

One must also consider the complicated effects of space travel on the human body. A paper bag lunch and an extra jacket wouldn't cut it on this voyage. The fantasy was really quite silly when she thought it through. Things would be much simpler if a black hole would just open up in the football field during the next cheerleading practice. That would solve several of Ann's problems without the hassle of physics and space travel.

Ann spent most of her days alone. She had difficulty making friends. Without a pack to surround her, she fell low on the Warren G. Harding Middle School pecking order and often suffered the taunts and cruelties of the alpha females. Her mother, when she wasn't rushing about with paint on her face, couldn't understand why Ann didn't fit in. Ann had glasses and a lovely smile. At the age of 12, she hadn't caught up with some of her peers physically, but her face was sweetly freckled and kind. She was the type of girl that grownups looked at and thought, *There goes one of the good ones.*

Ann was smart and spoke politely to her teachers. She made excellent grades, even in her difficult excel classes. Of course, she might as well have had a giant sign that said 'NERD' hanging over her head as she traversed the wilderness of middle school, but Ann had given up explaining any of this to her mother, who would shake her head and tell her to try a little harder.

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These conversations often happened at the dinner table. Her father seemed to defy the laws of nature, as he took all of his sustenance from newspapers and coffee. Rarely did he eat a full meal with the family; either hustling off for some meeting or football game on television. He was cold and distant, like some unreachable but yearned for star. He never offered his opinion about Ann's bullying problem other than to grunt and shake his head.

Her mother tended to ignore her husband and his icy demeanor, spending her time busily gardening or rushing from one painting project to another. She slowed down just enough from time to time to fuss over her daughter's social life, but quickly rushed off again when she noticed the light in the living room was perfect for sketching.

Things were not all bad for Ann, though. Despite the fact that her skills with math and sciences had condemned her to the 'Kingdom of Those Who Don't Get Football Player Boyfriends', they also comforted her. Her father, in a rare moment of generosity and interest in his child, had bought her a collection of VHS tapes for her 11th birthday. *Cosmos* featured a very friendly man named Carl, and he wanted to tell Ann all about the universe in which she lived.

Ann sat mesmerized for months, rewinding the tape over and over again until her favorite parts were scratchy. Carl told her all about black holes, solar flares, and the creation of the universe. She drank it in, like a desert drinking in spring rain. She learned a lovely new word: Astronomy. From then on, Ann held that word as close to her heart as a prayer.

Carl was a dear friend, and for a girl who didn't fit in, and whose father never really looked her in the eye, he was a very important friend indeed. Carl said that she was the child of ancient stars. At the end of a long day, and a quiet dinner with her parents, this filled her with purpose and meaning.

But, even having a friend in high places couldn't stop the little everyday hurts. Tuesday, April 21st, 1998, was a particularly painful day for Ann. Emily Key, the queen bee of the mean girls, spilled milk over Ann's head at lunch, stating loudly that the only people who liked outer space were freaky

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aliens. Emily's gang howled with laughter; everyone else looked away. Even as the lunch room monitor hauled Ann and Emily to the office, most of the students avoided Ann's gaze.

Ann felt completely miserable. Her hair was sticky from the milk; her eyes raw from crying. She had prayed to Carl to open up that black hole to swallow Emily and her friends, but her prayer went unanswered. In the principal's office, Emily insisted the whole thing had been a misunderstanding. The principal—who had been a principal quite some time and knew how to spot a bully, no matter how pretty that bully appeared—gave the girl detention for a week and sent her fuming back to class. Then he gave Ann a piece of chocolate, and called her mother to come pick her up.

Ann sat in the chair outside his office, slowly eating the candy. She felt a little better. Thank Carl for small miracles, like chocolate and caring educators. At least that was her thought until she saw mother's face when she pulled up to the school.

Tuesday, April 21st, 1998, was also the day Ann's father abandoned his wife and daughter. He hadn't been happy in a long time, and said he deserved better.

Mother told her all of this as they drove home from school. Her voice was steady and calm, but her eyes were red and dull. As she listened, Ann understood that Carl had misunderstood her prayers about the black hole or maybe he had just mixed up his coordinates, because instead of swallowing Emily, the black hole seemed to be forming in Ann's chest.

Mother made dinner as usual that night. They ate their spaghetti in silence. Ann noticed that her mother drank much more wine than usual. She barely looked at her daughter when Ann asked to be excused.

Ann spent the hours before bed glued to the television. Maybe if she watched *Cosmos* closely, Carl would give her some great universal wisdom about fathers leaving mothers and daughters. Wasn't there some cosmic rule that didn't allow that to happen? Weren't mothers and fathers as consistent as gravity? Ann felt the ragged edges of the black hole in her chest twinge; a piece of her reality sucked

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beyond the event horizon. If her mother and father were no longer together, how could she depend on anything that Carl said anymore? Maybe gravity would vanish one day. Ann already felt like she was floating.

Cosmos did bring one small piece of comfort, reminding her that April 21st marked one of the brightest nights of the Lyrid meteor shower. The previous year, Ann had received a telescope for her birthday in late March. When April arrived 21st arrived, Ann couldn't wait to try it out on her first meteor shower. It had only taken her a moment to locate the star Vega, within the constellation Lyra. Then she waited for the light show to begin. Her mother typically waited with her, reminding her daughter frequently, "It's a school night." The year before, Ann miraculously spotted at least 20 meteors: brilliant streaks of fire momentarily dancing through the night. This year, Ann had almost forgotten. School bullies and family catastrophe had wiped it out of her mind, but Carl's soothing voice reminded her to keep looking up.

Her mother had staggered off to bed early. She had hugged Ann extra tight before wishing her goodnight. She didn't say anything about the sky, or remembering it was a school night. She didn't even tell Ann to mind her bedtime; just gave her a tight, boozy hug, and then shut the door. Ann felt a slight twinge of sadness as she grabbed her jacket and her beloved telescope, but as she turned around to face the sky, the feeling was replaced with exhilaration. She would have no curfew and the chance to stay up all night watching the celestial dance above!

Ann sat in a lawn chair, her telescope within quick reach. A chilly wind tried to tickle the back of her neck, but Ann pulled her jacket tighter. It was quiet. That part of town went to bed early on weeknights. In the distance, a dog let out a mournful howl. A nagging fear of being alone, outside, and late at night, whispered in her ear, but Ann tuned it out. There was no reason to be afraid of the dark. She wouldn't be able to see the stars if there wasn't darkness.

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As the night crept by on tiny cat paws, clouds began to move in. The nagging breeze became more insistent. The hole in Ann's chest ached, as she realized that her meteor spotting chances were dwindling as the clouds accumulated. The first cold drops of rain fell across her cheeks gently, almost apologetically. *Well, maybe it will go away quickly*, Ann thought. Then the deluge began. Ann didn't move at first. She simply sat in her plastic lawn chair, allowing the rain to wrap itself around her. She felt betrayed. After a few minutes, she felt too disheartened and cold to remain still any longer. With drenched feet, numb fingers, and the weariness of someone much older than 12, she trudged back into the house. She didn't bother to rescue her telescope.

Ann pulled off her soaking pink jacket and threw it in a heap near the bed. A moment later, she tossed her dripping socks, shoes, and clothes after it. Ann pulled on her pajamas, switched off her overhead light, and sat on the edge of her bed; fingers gently tracing the blue stitches on the comforter. She felt cold and alone. Her chest ached. Did all black holes hurt this much? She was tempted to go knock on her mother's door, but she didn't want to face her right now. So she stayed put: a girl caught in the strange vacuum of adolescence, sadly sitting on the edge of her small twin bed, watching the rain drip against her window.

Suddenly, a flash of light lit up her small bedroom. It illuminated the backyard, throwing the abandoned lawn chair and telescope into view. It disappeared as quickly as it came, leaving Ann blinking black spots away from her eyes. *It must have been lightning*, she thought. Goose bumps prickled against her arms. She had never seen lightning quite that bright before. Maybe someone had turned on the garage light. Or maybe it was her father coming home. It was dark, so he must have been driving with his brights on. Ann felt hope filling up her chest. She scooted closer to the window to peek out, certain that she would see her father's familiar, burly form stumbling through the rainy night.

Ann squinted. It was hard to make anything out now that the lightning, or whatever it had been, had subsided. There was her lawn chair, knocked over on the ground. *Must have been the wind*,

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she thought. Her telescope was exactly where she left it, but it was now facing the opposite direction. *Some really strong wind.* A moment later, she spotted movement. Her heart skipped a beat. It *must* be her father! He had realized the errors of his ways and was coming home, humbled and repentant. Ann was just about to turn away from the window and run to her mother's room to tell her the good news, when she saw the movement again. Stories of monsters and ghosts filled her head. The prickle of goose bumps was more intense this time. Summoning every ounce of courage in her body, Ann squinted against the darkness.

At first she didn't see anything. Then, slowly, someone stood up. It appeared to be a man. Ann could just barely make out the silhouette, but she could see broad shoulders and a tall frame. At first, she felt relieved. It *was* her father. He must have stumbled over her chair in the dark. But...no. Her father was not that tall. Ann's mouth went dry. There was a strange person standing in her backyard.

Whoever it was, suddenly turned around, and looked up at Ann's window. Ann couldn't look away. In the yard below, where she had spent the last few hours staring up at the sky in a plastic lawn chair, a person gazed up at Ann with eyes that glowed orange as fire.

Ann's bravery had reached its limit for that evening. She screamed.

A moment later (perhaps a few moments longer than if she hadn't imbibed quite so much), Ann's mother crashed through the door. She pulled Ann close to her, demanding what was wrong. Ann couldn't speak. The black hole in her chest was throbbing painfully. There was a monster with glowing gold eyes in her backyard. Her mother, usually so good for calming night time spooks, appeared frail and shaky; hardly the person to protect the house against the terror outside. It was just too much for Ann. All she could do was point at the window and collapse into tears.

"There's nothing out there, sweetie," mother cooed, her words only slightly slurred. Ann pointed again. How could her mother not see the beast out there? Mother insisted that she look out

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the window and see for herself. Reluctantly, Ann peeked out. There was the knocked over chair. There was her telescope. There was no man with glowing eyes.

Mother stroked Ann's trembling back for a moment; then gently led her daughter to bed. Ann allowed herself to be tucked in. Maybe she hadn't seen anything. Maybe the black hole in her chest and the spooky stories in her head had tricked her.

Ann lay perfectly still for a long time after her mother kissed her goodnight and turned off the light. How could she ever fall asleep now? Sending up a silent plea to Carl to watch over her, she shut her eyes. For a while, all she could see was a dark figure with a burning gaze. He momentarily transformed into the ghoulish shape of Emily Key, cackling over her, but despite everything sleep began to wrap itself around Ann. As she drifted off, Emily transformed into glittering stars, dancing and singing a lullaby high up in the sky.

Outside, the rain continued. The telescope sat sadly abandoned, water creeping into all of its crevices. A dark figure moved through the backyard, its burning eyes squinting against the deluge. Steam rose from its shoulders, as it silently slipped away.

2.

"Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known."—Carl Sagan

April 21st, 2015

The telescope never recovered.

It rusted in the rain, and 12-year-old Ann had been forced to throw it away. She cried for two nights after that. Now that there was only one income, Mother couldn't afford a new one. Ann's late night star gazing was over.

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Seventeen years later, as she hurried through the dark streets towards home, Ann found herself thinking about that telescope. Once, looking up into the darkness, she had felt certain that she was part of something wonderful. Carl had been up there, kindly looking down, gently reminding her that despite bullies and distant parents, she too had a place in the universe. *That was a long time ago*, she reminded herself.

She knew her existence was nowhere near as special as she had once imagined: 29-year-old community college student by day, waitress by night, and nurse to her ailing mother all the time. She still lived in her childhood home, and still worked the same job since high school graduation. She hadn't spoken to Carl or her father since the morning she had found her ruined telescope and an empty seat at the breakfast table.

Seventeen years ago, she had stopped making good grades. Eventually, she even packed away her beloved *Cosmos* tapes. Her mother began to drag her to family counselors; friendly women with soft voices and stuffed animals in their offices. Ann would humor them by clutching a velvet turtle, but she always insisted she was fine. She answered their questions with shrugs. Her mother eventually gave up and cancelled all of the appointments. She drank a lot of wine in those days.

As the years went by, Emily Key and her ilk gradually ignored Ann, as they turned their teasing against more vocal victims. Their taunting and jabs no longer had the effect they once had. In the beginning, their cruelty had made Ann feel ridiculed and alone, but now she just felt empty. It seemed as though she was drifting aimlessly through space. She felt as though Carl had abandoned her right alongside her father. There had to have been a reason. Maybe it was because she was the only person in existence who wasn't special, who wasn't full of star dust. That's why her father didn't even come back for his things, and why Carl's wisdom rang hollow and meaningless.

After high-school, Ann had started working at the Italian restaurant. Her grades weren't good enough for scholarships to any big universities and her mother certainly couldn't pay her way. Ann

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figured if she worked for a little while, she could save up enough for community college, and then a bigger program. So she worked.

Then, two years later, after eight months of misdiagnoses and countless tests, the doctors scratched their heads and said, "Well, this is certainly rare for *this* part of the country." Her mother had been diagnosed with Lyme disease. "Who gets *Lyme* disease?" Ann had asked, incredulously. Apparently, a lot of people did and apparently it was very serious.

Ann had watched her mother bloat and swell and shrink and stretch. She had watched as her mother's hair thinned and her skin grew dry. She had helped cook the special diets and drove to the special clinics. She had watched as microscopic bacteria wreaked havoc on her mother's body, making it impossible to paint or garden or be a person. Ann had argued with insurance people who simply just couldn't cover that particular disease. Ann had kicked a hole in the wall once after hearing a very friendly customer service representative tell her she should be grateful her mother didn't have cancer.

At age 21, Ann had become the sole-provider, working as many shifts at the restaurant as she could. Now, most of her money went to keeping the lights on and buying pricey medications. Despite everything, she still had saved enough to enroll part time while acting as full time caregiver. Now, she was finally in her last year at community college and had plans to start applying at institutions. Of course, it would have to be a nearby college, because her mother needed frequent care and trips to her clinic sessions, but Ann couldn't see any way around that.

She would go to college for something practical like nursing or administration, certainly not for anything involving astronomy. The only connection she felt with the stars above her head was the churning black hole in her chest. *That* had never gone away. It still sucked in all feelings of happiness or joy, destroying them beyond its event horizon. Of course, Ann knew there wasn't really a black hole in her chest. Scientists had recently discovered that the nearest black hole was 1600 light years away. Ann still occasionally read articles about space and astronomical discoveries, but she refused to become as

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excited as she once was. Ann couldn't help but wonder if her dream of throwing Emily Key (now a Facebook friend who frequently posted pictures of her blonde, pretty toddler) into a black hole was more plausible. The thought briefly made her smile.

She still had a slight smile on the night of April 21st, 2015. As she rushed home from yet another double shift, she wasn't thinking about bacteria, insurance forms, money, or Emily Key. Ann's thoughts were amongst the stars. She recalled for the first time in a long time Carl's gentle voice telling her about the big bang theory and star stuff. Even after all of these years, she knew the Lyrid meteor shower would be at its peak that evening. A childish shiver of excitement went through her, and for the first time in seventeen years, she didn't try to stop it.

Despite the somewhat dark, eerie, and empty streets, Ann felt the best she had in a while. It had been a good shift at the restaurant. She had made over \$100 in tips. Her boss had let her leave a few minutes early. Maybe that's why she wanted to look up. Maybe that's why the image of the man with glowing eyes from her childhood momentarily flashed through her mind as she walked by a black alley way.

Ann quickly dismissed it as silly little girl fantasy, one she had shut out long ago. The sudden memory was the product of an emotional mind. That was all. More realistic fears of assault and abduction crossed her mind too, but it was a safe town. She walked home every night by herself without any problems.

Her eyes flicked upwards. *Was that a twinkle peeking out of that orange cloud?* Maybe, just this once, she would take the long way. She would cut through the park near the house. Maybe she would locate the star Vega, in the constellation Lyra, for old time's sake.

The park was deserted. It was still the part of town where everyone went to bed early. Her feet crunched on dead leaves as she made her way down the dirt path. She could smell rain, but the clouds were taking their time. Ann gazed upwards. *There!* A sudden stroke of light flew across the sky,

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disappearing as quickly as it arrived. Ann blinked. It was the first meteor she had seen in years.

Another burning trail scorched the sky. Ann stopped and stared upwards. One could expect to see 5 or 10 meteors in an hour. She had been lucky enough to see 2 in quick succession. Perhaps it was a sign.

“It’s a nice night out here, isn’t it?”

Ann gasped and spun around. Prickles of fear raced down her spine. She hadn’t realized anyone else was in the park with her. Her mind went fuzzy and she quickly fumbled for the pepper spray she kept in her purse. Residents in safe towns still could use precaution; something she should have remembered before walking alone through a dark park, late at night.

There was a man standing behind her, a very strange looking man. His clothes were an assortment of sizes and styles: sleek dress pants, pink sparkly flip flops, and what appeared to be a jersey from the local high school basketball team. The stranger seemed completely unaware of the appearance of his attire. He gave off an air of confidence and nonchalance, as if it were perfectly normal to hang around in the dark wearing women’s footwear. His hair was dark and tousled by the wind. Although his pale face was chiseled and handsome, there was something remarkably otherworldly and...not human about him. *Don’t be ridiculous*, Ann thought.

It wasn’t his attire or strange face that made Ann’s mouth go dry, however. The man’s eyes were vivid gold. They burned like a lion’s in the darkness. Ann had seen eyes like that before. In fact, she had just been thinking about them. On a rainy night, seventeen years ago, they had looked up at her from the recesses of her back yard. *Definitely not human*.

“You...you...impossible...”she croaked, clutching her pepper spray. Her hand trembled as she held it up. “Who are you?”

The man shrugged casually. He stood a few feet away from Ann, leaning against a dimly burning lamppost. He didn’t seem the least bit bothered by the pepper spray, nor did he seem particularly

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threatening. He acted as though they were just two acquaintances that had happened to bump into each other, late at night in an abandoned park.

“Well, that’s a bit of a funny question,” he said slowly. His voice was as strange as the rest of him: low and soft, but wispy and accented. “I don’t think you’d believe me if I told you,”

“I saw you,” Ann said, slowly. She squinted in the darkness. “You were in my backyard. A long time ago,”

“Did you?” The man straightened up from the lamp post without answering and took a step forward. He was smiling. Ann backed up quickly. If she turned her back and ran, would he chase her? She had never been a very fast runner. Ann’s sense of reality seemed to be wavering. She suddenly felt like a lost, lonely 12-year-old with dried milk in her hair again, staring out her back window, wishing her father would come home. Then, like now, reality had wavered. She vaguely recalled Carl saying something about reality being subjective, or maybe she had just made that up, or maybe she had completely lost her mind. After all, she should have started running long ago, or screaming, or doing anything other than engaging this wacko with strange eyes in an empty park under a night sky full of meteors.

Ann, however, didn’t do anything. Her shaky voice seemed to be coming from far away as she asked, “Why were you in my backyard when I was 12? And what the hell are you doing here now? And what the hell are you?”

The man’s eyes lit up some more. They were burning stars in the air.

“ ‘What are you’ is a little easier to answer, although still fairly unbelievable for a person like you,” He said *person* like a tenured professor would say *undergraduate*. “Let’s just say I am a visitor here and I particularly enjoy the night air in this part of the town,”

“What the hell does that mean?” Ann’s irritation cut through the fog in her brain. A small piece of reality snapped back into place. She didn’t like games. Not with insurance representatives and

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certainly not with strange and handsome men in parks. *Although, this is the first time I've ever engaged with the latter*, Ann thought.

The man ran fingers through his messy hair. "Well, if you insist, I shall tell you, " He pointed upwards. " I'm from there. I left my brother and sister Lyrids for a while to explore your planet and decided to stay for a bit. I happened to come down in your, rather muddy backyard and now ever since then, I've been exploring this vast planet of yours."

He smiled and glanced up fondly. "This was supposed to be the night I returned to my brothers and sisters, but alas, I find that I am not yet done exploring. So, if you would like to stroll the rest of the way with me, I would be happy to escort you." He wiggled his eyebrows mischievously. "I hear there are weirdos who come out here at night."

Ann lowered her pepper spray. She was certain she had gone completely insane. The man's words had made something strange flutter in her chest. She suddenly believed very strongly that there was something cosmic and strange happening. Black holes emitted thermal energy when they evaporated and she could feel *something* warm bubbling up inside of her. In the morning, if this weird man claiming to be a walking, talking meteorite didn't abduct and murder her, she would most likely have to be committed to some sort of psychiatric ward, but tonight, something told her to believe in something bigger than herself again.

The man was still smiling as he gazed fondly at Ann. It was the same smile he had when he had been looking up at the sky.

"Ah, to be a young, care free meteor again," the man said cheerfully, waving his hand heavenward. Another streak of light flitted by. "As I have graduated to meteorite status, I suppose you can call me Rite, just to keep things simple." He offered one bare arm to Ann. She didn't think anything about this situation was simple.

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Ann hesitated. *Well, we've gone this far around the bend already, what's a little further?* She still had her pepper spray if things got weird...or rather weirder. She took his arm. His skin was surprisingly hot. They began to walk in the direction of Ann's house. Rite began to whistle a tune, something strange and melodic. It sounded vaguely familiar.

Ann tried to say something several times, but each time she stopped. Whoever this man, alien, walking, talking meteorite was, he made her very nervous. At first she had been nervous in the 'this man might try to kill me way'. Now it was growing into a 'this man is rather attractive and I wonder if he has a girlfriend' nervousness. A blush crept up her cheeks. *I need to get out of the house more.*

"I suppose you're wondering how all this is possible," Rite said, cheerfully. "Hunks of space junk aren't normally people shaped, now are they?"

Ann had actually been wondering if meteorites had cell phone numbers. *What is wrong with me,* she thought. She gave herself a little mental shake and nodded gravely.

"Well, I've spent quite a lot of time at your universities in this world," Rite began. "In my studies, I have found several of your scientists' theories about the universe quite fascinating."

"One of my particular favorites is the theory of the multiverse," he continued. "Human scientists have quite the variety of explanation when it comes to the multiverse, but the basic premise is that *this* universe, the one that humans on this planet perceive as *reality* is only one in an infinite number of universes. This universe is only a speck amongst specks amongst specks on a vast unknowable cosmic scale. Some claim that these countless other universes operate under the same laws of physics, but there are those who disagree. Some say that the laws are different. They believe that all of these universes are vast and unknowable and that they play by their own sets of rules."

Rite talked quietly, but with intensity, as they covered the short distance to Ann's home. Rite's feet barely made a sound in his flip flops. Ann found herself struggling to keep up in her black, spaghetti splattered waitress shoes. She could just make out her porch light ahead. Her mother must have left it

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on for her. It shone like a beacon on the otherwise dark street. So much could happen in the time and distance that little light travelled.

“I rather like the idea about playing by a universe’s own rules, “ Rite explained as they approached the house. “ I figure that’s what best applies to me. There I was, tramping through space, enjoying the view, when suddenly with a great pull I found myself crashing into something soft and wet.”

He inclined his head towards her. “I believe that was your back yard. I stood, my now human brain telling me that was indeed what I was doing—standing. I found I had a body; a mind. Strange electrical impulses charged through my head, telling me that I was cold. My feet were wet. Another electrical impulse shot through my leg. It hurt, I supposed, from the impact. Then I saw a strange being, peering down at me. I instinctively knew it was a girl, and I was most likely trespassing in her mother and father’s—,” Ann flinched. “—backyard. So, I fled. I found clothes in a dumpster; a seat to sit on. I wasn’t afraid. Merely curious and to be honest, a tad bit delighted. Meteors don’t have many opportunities to sit and contemplate our existence. Nor do we have burritos, something I discovered a short while later,”

He smiled fondly. “So, my own personal theory is that somehow the laws ruling over your universe bent a little, and somehow a flying hunk of space junk became a sentient being. One who could think, and feel, and develop a love of Mexican food.”

Only one more block and they would arrive at Ann’s home. She would bid this strange man or space alien or angel or whatever he was goodnight and hurry up the stairs and lock the door quickly behind her. The black hole smarted at the thought. Was she actually sad that this bizarre encounter was coming to an end?

Rite stopped suddenly and turned to face Ann. He looked deep into her eyes. “But, I suppose I am boring you with all this shop-talk. I have to confess, I have ulterior motives for being here tonight

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other than just taking the night air and walking a pretty lady home." *Oh boy, here it comes*, Ann thought, icy fingers tracing her spine. *Now he's going to tell me he really needs a skin jacket and that I'm a perfect fit...and did he just call me pretty?*

"After I came down in your yard, I stuck around for a little while," Rite said. "I was curious about the little being in the window, the one with so much sadness, but so much starlight in her eyes."

Yup. I'll be a sports coat by morning.

"I watched as your mother put boxes of men's clothing out by the curb. I saw the telescope thrown in the trash. I saw you, sad and alone, day by day. After a while I grew curious about the outside world and I left. I was a bit hesitant to leave this little being I had grown so curious and concerned for, but the world called me, and it sang a very pretty song. I never stopped thinking about you, though,"

"Every year after that, I returned for the beginning of the Lyrid shower. But, you stopped watching. I never saw you with a telescope or peeking out your window on those nights. So, I let you be."

Ann felt like she needed to explain. "My father left and things weren't good at school or at home. And, I just didn't want to see the stars anymore. I felt like it didn't matter, that *I* didn't matter."

Rite tilted his head, curiously. "Why of course you matter! You're no different from myself, or from the collapsing stars or orbiting moons I've witnessed. You are just as important as anyone I met at those fancy universities or any of the mighty planets I've seen silently dancing through space and time."

Ann was unsure of what to make of everything Rite had told her, but a familiar and friendly whisper reverberated through Ann's mind: "*The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood...*"

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They began to walk again and moments later had arrived in front of Ann's house. The front porch light buzzed cheerfully, but the rest of the windows were dark. Maybe tonight her mother was actually sleeping. *Wouldn't that be a miracle*, thought Ann.

"So, because you are so important and because once, I saw a flicker of star stuff in a little girl's face in her upstairs bedroom, I would like to offer you a proposition,"

Ann raised her eyebrows. She had let her mind drift and her guard down, but not *that* much.

"Look, Rite, I don't know what you think you know about me, but—,"

"An adventure!" he interrupted cheerfully. "I wish to travel this world again! Find the crevices and creases I missed. Discover as much as possible. Yes, I've read the books at the universities, but 'nullius in verba'! Take no man's word! And I would like you to accompany me." Ann was momentarily taken aback.

"An adventure? I couldn't possibly go anywhere. I have no money, and my mother needs me..." she began. A million excuses and reasons flitted through her brain, but Rite was smiling broadly, apparently unconcerned about such earthly matters.

"I will give you one year from tonight to get your affairs in order," he said cheerfully, patting her arm. "Money is no concern; well, maybe a little bit of a concern, but I have my resources! I'm not the only meteorite walking around here after all."

Ann wasn't sure what to make of that, but she wasn't really sure about anything at the moment. "I can't just leave my mother. She's very sick," She had been responsible for so long, she couldn't just leave. Could she?

"Again, I have my resources. And if your mother is as full of the same star stuff as you, I know she's a fighter." He glanced fondly at the house. If he had been watching her for all this time, he must've seen her mother's comings and goings, and her physical transformations.

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“I’ll think about it,” Ann said hesitantly, but for the first time in a long time, the black hole felt like it was evaporating, being replaced by something warm and bright. An adventure? A chance to go somewhere, see something, be something?

“Of course, my dear,” he grinned. “In one year, I will return, and if you are ready, we will meet in that park and we will go out and find our place in this world.”

Suddenly, he reached out and laid a gentle palm on her breast, right above her heart . Ann jumped and swatted him away. Was he actually a creep after all, trying to cop a feel? Rite smiled sadly at her, lowering his hand to his side.

“Extraordinary,” he murmured. “I imagine that must sting a bit at times,”

Ann stared at him.

“It appears I’m not the only one bending the rules a bit,” He grinned, cocking an eyebrow. “But, it makes sense doesn’t it? We’ve got all the ingredients we need. But be careful. Black holes, as with any form of energy, don’t really go away. They only change form. It’s up to you to mold it into what you want it to be,”

With that, he leaned forward, kissed her cheek, and walked away into the dark towards her unlit backyard. His lips had felt warm and electric. Ann hesitated a moment, and then sprinted after him, sure she would find the weird man and his pink flip flops, but the yard was empty. The only thing out there was a lawn chair. Ann checked around, but could find no trace of anyone having been there. She slowly lowered herself into the chair. One year...and then what? Would she remain here, drifting through life? *Stars*, she remembered, *were always being pulled elsewhere, changing, becoming something new*. Was she any different? Her eyes turned upwards, towards the countless points of light above her. From her vantage point, each appeared to be standing perfectly still, but she knew they were all hurrying on to some unknown destination.

Star Stuff

In the morning, Ann's mother found her asleep in the chair. Ann's skin was damp with dew; her hair messy and tousled by the April wind. The rain had held off, but it was still a damp morning. Her mother shook her gently awake.

"Did you stay out here all night?" she asked. Although she still looked pale and thin, she had a sparkle in her eye that morning.

"I wanted to watch the Lyrids," Ann answered with a shrug and a yawn. She thought of her strange walk through the dark last night. She thought of the man with an otherworldly face and burning eyes. Then, she thought of the empty suitcase she kept under her bed.

"You haven't done that in years. It makes me happy to see you out here," Mother grinned. She had grabbed another lawn chair and placed it across from Ann. Not paying attention to the clammy seat, she sat down and reached for her daughter's hand. "I wanted to wake you because I received a phone call this morning. A specialist is going to start working at my clinic. He says that with some new procedures I'll be able to be independent in 8 months!" Ann smiled back, remembering Rite and his resources. "So, you can take a trip or go to university. Or, simply stop worrying about me! I may even be able to start painting again!" Her mother's smile was as bright as the morning sun. Ann squeezed her hand. They'd been through so much, but hadn't someone once told her that the vast expanses of the universe were only bearable through love?

Ann felt full of glittering pieces of joy that morning as, hand in hand, mother and daughter made their way towards the house. Where once a black hole churned and sucked everything beyond its dark borders, something new was taking shape inside her. It was warm and burned, illuminating all of the dark and lonely places within Ann. She was sure that Rite could explain it all to her. Maybe she would ask him all about it when she saw him again in a year. Maybe.

Star Stuff

“Do you know where my old *Cosmos* videos are? I’d really like to start watching them again,” Ann told her mother as they made their way into the house to prepare for another day on a small blue dot of a planet, steadily spinning around an average star, in an ever-expanding universe.