

We Went to Mars, and a Moon

Maya agreed to identify the body. There was no family to speak of, at least no one who could be bothered to drive forty-five minutes to get to the county coroner's office. Sheriff Wilson had called her the night before to deliver the news. His long, heavy sigh had conveyed that it was the call – that call – the one they all feared. He had been direct and solemn and kind. Two generations of Tulsa County cops knew Astrid, and by extension Maya. Sheriff Wilson had been a young patrolman when they were in high school. He knew Astrid's story and Maya's phone number. It was logical that she would be the who would identify what remained of Astrid.

“The coroner is perfunctory,” Maya thought as she gave him an affirmative nod. She had seen her fair share of the perfunctory over the years. It used to bother her, but she preferred it now. She had long outgrown the need for coddling. Afterwards, she thanked the coroner for being a professional. Standing there, looking at Astrid's serene expression, she was relieved that anguish was not the final message written all over Astrid's face.

Later that day, Maya began making arrangements for the body. The body. What did that even mean? It was no longer Astrid, but yet it was. Astrid had always been a body of some kind: a somebody, a nobody, a body in motion. But never *the* body.

A human body is harder to dispense with than she had imagined. The spirit of Astrid had gone in a flash, yet this next step would take days. She was now in charge of the body's future. Earth or fire? Ashes or dust? She couldn't think about it just now. She needed time. She had many arrangements to make. An apartment to excavate. People to call. Paperwork.

The last time she saw Astrid, the complete and alive Astrid, was five years ago. They had met up in Las Cruces, New Mexico, of all places. Maya was in town for work when Astrid called her from El Paso.

“Come down to Mexico with me,” she had begged Maya. “It’s an all-female peyote retreat, led by a female shaman.”

“I can’t. I’m in Las Cruces for work. Two weeks.”

“I’ll come up after the retreat.”

“To Las Cruces?”

“Yeah, why not?”

Maya always declined offers that included drugs. She didn’t like them. She had seen what drugs had done to her family and friends. It’s not that she hadn’t tried a few things over the years and didn’t understand the appeal. It was the tenacity of that appeal that scared her. And she found no romance in addiction. She despised how addicts were depicted in films and novels as beautiful and tragic victims with never a hair out of place. But in real life, Maya had seen that addiction is an ugly, monstrous beast that consumes the body and soul.

Astrid, like many addicts, had spent her whole life just looking for a way to heal her wounds. There were times when she cut herself, when she was running manic and hooking up with the scariest of people, when she shoplifted, when she was up for days on end, high on her own chemistry, until she finally crashed back into despair. And then were the people, the ones charged with Astrid’s care. They had wounded her more than other addicts who had robbed her.

Maya wondered at the chasm between the brief time it takes to inflict the wound and the eons of time needed to heal it. It was a bleak place, that chasm. And it angered her how so many

people seek to inflict pain on others, especially children. Especially vulnerable children. Like Astrid had been. The fey and gentle Astrid with the large searching eyes and the deep desire to be loved. People had always been drawn to her, to that inner glow that she shared too easily with a predatory world. And that world finally took her.

That day in Las Cruces had been difficult. When Astrid walked into the Big Bar and Billiards, Maya had barely recognized her gaunt face. Her eyes seemed too big to fit properly in their sockets as they strained to see something far away, beyond the horizon. Her hair had been stripped of its sheen and now was a jumble of straw, chaotic with waves and curls held together by rubber bands and bobby pins. Everything about her was unkempt.

“How are you feeling?” Maya had asked.

“I feel great.”

“You don’t look so great. Sorry. I’m being honest.”

“It doesn’t matter. I feel great. It was the most exhilarating experience of my life.”

“In what way?”

“It’s hard to say exactly. It was an amazing journey.”

“What kind of a journey?”

“Through time and space.”

“Time and space?”

“You do know that time doesn’t really exist, right? It’s just a reflection of our need to order the world we see. Nothing ever ends.”

“But things change. We age over time. We die.”

“Decay is real. Time is it’s description.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Time is just a measurement. Meaningless. And you! You are a slave to it. You can’t keep your eyes off your phone. Impatient. With that foot tapping. I don’t think you are taking me seriously.”

Astrid was a drug addict. She had been for decades. It wasn’t her fault. Yes, she was self-indulgent. She had acted out and paid the price for it. But what did the world, yes that world, the one that had taken so much, expect from her? She was the one who had found her father’s body hanging from the high beams of their sprawling modernist home. In an instant, at age thirteen she was alone in the world, dealing with all the police and other authority figures. Alone. And all anyone could say was that she seemed so stoic, and they praised her for how grownup she was. No one seemed to understand that she was bleeding inside.

Her father’s death left her very well-off, but extremely damaged. No child deserves that trauma, Maya thought, nor the abusive relatives that Astrid had to live with until she was eighteen. They were dour people who believed that hardship builds character. They found face slapping and shaming to be the best punishments. They saw Astrid as weak, like her mother, who had died in childbirth, and complained about how much of a burden she was. Yet when Astrid asked to live with Maya’s family, those dour people had no intention of giving up the five thousand a month they received for Astrid’s care.

Maya’s family was working class, loud, and loving. They let Astrid stay with them, sometimes for weeks at a time. By the time the girls were in high school, they were inseparable. They had needed each other. But at college, their paths diverged. Maya was a serious student, worried about how to pay for tuition and books. Astrid, now receiving the five thousand a

month from the trust fund, was all over the place. She would sign up for and then drop dozens of classes, over and over again until the university gave her an ultimatum. She had discovered new drugs and new friends who loved them. Maya had tried to convince Astrid that that drugs were not the solution to all her problems and that her new friends were only interested in her money. Astrid had become angry, and in retaliation surrounded herself with more preening predators.

That day at the Big Bar and Billiards in Las Cruces, Astrid had been anything but glowing. She seemed to emit no light at all.

“But what happened?” Maya had asked.

“I could see the past, present, and future all at the same time. I can’t really explain it any better than that.”

“Like, yourself in the future?”

“No. It wasn’t about me. It was about everything.”

“Everything?”

“I saw everything all at once. It was incredible.”

“Like what? I want to understand.”

“The entire universe. Infinity. It is amazing. God is math. The math of the universe.”

Maya had felt herself smirking and tried to stop it. But Astrid hadn’t seemed to notice as she carried on.

“We went to Mars, and a moon,” Astrid said. “One of Saturn’s moon. Humans cannot survive space, by the way. It was a pointless endeavor, all those colonies.”

“Mars? Who went to Mars?”

“Humans.”

“Which humans?”

“I don’t have all of the details. I saw the bases. They were abandoned. No one was rescued.”

“And how did you know it was real, and not just something that your brain conjured up?”

Looking back on that conversation, Maya thought how insensitive she had been. She hadn’t believed a thing that Astrid said. She hadn’t really listened because she had been preoccupied with her own issues, all insignificant now. She could have asked any other question. But she didn’t.

“You don’t even want to listen,” Astrid had said.

“I do, it’s just ... remember Kenny McEwen? How he said that aliens abducted him? I’m kind of getting that vibe here.”

“He was a schizophrenic. I’m not. My brain is fine. It’s not the same as being a drug addict. There. I admit it to your judgey face. I am a full-blown drug addict.”

“I’m not judging.”

“You are. And it hurts. You’re my best friend. Family, even. And you are the only person who has ever truly loved me. For me. I don’t care what other people think. You are the only one whose opinion matters. And this hurts.”

Before she went to Mexico for the peyote experience, Astrid had explained that it helped heroin addicts kick the addiction. She wasn’t going down there to the middle of nowhere just to get high. High wasn’t what she wanted. New eyes. That was what she had wanted. And she had them. It was just that Maya didn’t understand it at the time. Even now, she struggled to

understand. Maybe she had been cruel to Astrid that day. Maybe not cruel. Dismissive. But to someone like Astrid, it was a cruelty hard to bear.

Astrid had left Las Cruces that next day, early in the morning, without saying goodbye. Maya for the first time felt a wedge between them. They never saw each other again. It's not that they didn't speak. They did. They did the FaceTime and Zoom and the Google things. They texted each other. They sent each other postcards and letters expressing the same love and closeness, but something was missing.

Once, during a particularly difficult call, Astrid had mentioned that she had been cutting herself again. This news shocked Maya and she was ready to get on a plane to wherever Astrid was. But Astrid wouldn't say where she was. She had become more and more unpredictable. But she wasn't using. She had gone to every length to prove to Maya and to the doctors that she was clean. Living clean. Doing the counseling thing. Medication. Meditation. Travel. Staying away from the bad influences.

But then, after being injured in a car accident in Switzerland, she relapsed. She came back from Europe and went straight to the places where her old drug buddies hung out. The Tulsa County cops had found her on the roof of someone's house. And that time, Maya had given Astrid an ultimatum.

"I have always loved you goddamnit! Why do you always do this to me?" she had shouted at Astrid over the phone.

"You don't understand. You never have. This is a monster that won't let me go! It comes for me in the night and hounds me and hounds me until I feel its teeth in my neck. Every single day of my life! I am sorry that you think this is about you!"

The conversation had been jagged and it cut at every inch of their flesh. But in the end Astrid had relented and re-entered the rehab and she had followed the rules and she agreed to seek counseling. And she did. And she had seemed fine.

It grieved Maya to think that she could never know the truth. Had Astrid been fine? She would call from Paris, or Tokyo, or Buenos Aires or Santiago de Chile, and tell Maya how she was getting so much better. And when they would FaceTime, Astrid did look good. She did seem happy. And she kept saying that she was going to come and visit Maya and some of the old friends. She had even mentioned that she had tracked down her father's cousins and uncles and that they had been so kind. And she was hoping to make amends with her mother's family, although that seemed unlikely. She travelled the world for an entire year, visiting old friends and making new ones.

Maya had urged Astrid to come and visit and take care of the apartment and some urgent paperwork, but Astrid had said she wasn't ready. She still had some work to do. And finally, when Astrid did arrive in Tulsa, it was without warning. Maya was away on business. And it wasn't Astrid who called that night. It was the police. They had called to tell Maya that they had found Astrid naked, having a bubble bath in one of the public fountains.

"I think she's been cutting herself," one of the officers had said, "on the inside of her thighs."

Maya, still in Denver, had let the police know who to call, and they took Astrid away before Maya could extract herself from her obligations and get on a plane. When she finally did get a chance to speak to Astrid, it was three days later. And all Astrid did was call her a cunt and

a petty bourgeoisie with no life but work. Then she burst into tears and apologized for always letting Maya down.

“Stop saying that,” Maya had said. “You’re not letting me down. You’re letting you down.”

“Me? You don’t understand.”

“I’m trying to.”

“You don’t get it.”

“Are you cutting yourself again?”

“What do you think?”

“Why are you doing it?”

“Because I want to feel something.”

The coroner had said that the cause of death was not a drug overdose. It was blood loss. Loss, Maya thought. That is all that Astrid had experienced in life. Loss on top of loss. Maya had tried to always be there. But it was so hard. Astrid needed something, something beyond what she or anyone else could give. She needed a kinder god.

Maya had listened intently as the coroner explained how quickly a person can bleed out when the arteries of the inner thigh are severed. Everything made logical sense. The facts of the case. The story. Logical sense is what Maya sought. Had always sought. But Astrid’s body, *the* body, made no sense to her. The anger of her grief sought to blame someone, not just anyone but everyone who had ever used Astrid. All those addict zombies. The opportunists. Psychiatrists with their scripts. And she wondered for a few seconds if she had been no better than any of those people. She had recoiled from Astrid that day in Las Cruces, almost angry that Astrid had

seemed to let herself go, as if her beauty no longer mattered. Maya asked herself “Am I that shallow? Is that all that ever mattered to me?”

As Maya readied herself for the meeting with the funeral director, she stopped in the middle of her living room, looking at a photo of herself and Astrid on a beach. Phuket. That was a magical trip. At the time, they were twenty-one, two birds soaring through a sky endless with possibilities. Looking at the photo, at the two of them in their pink and orange bikinis, she began to weep for the first time since she got the news.

She remembered that small village in the south of Spain, somewhere near Almeria, that day when she and Astrid had sat outside in a shady courtyard, eating canned mussels and bread and olives. Their host was an old man who had been a child extra in some dusty old western filmed in the nearby Tabernas desert. He had called across the courtyard to a man carrying an esparto grass bag. The man came over and sat the bag on the table. It was filled with large snails. These they were having for dinner. Astrid had been fascinated. That night, the entire village came out to dance under the stars and celebrate the village saint. And Astrid had danced all night. She had been an ethereal beauty, aswirl under the moonlight. Happy. Enraptured.

Maya tried to picture Astrid out in the Mexican desert, with the shaman and the peyote, under the moon and stars. She remembered those eyes, Astrid’s eyes, her searching eyes, how they had reached out for her that day in Las Cruces. And Maya had not understood.

Astrid’s eyes had been opened, opened wide, opened to the universe, to Mars, and a moon. It was Maya who couldn’t see. Maybe, maybe if she had listened to Astrid instead of mocking her in that moment, that moment that had been so important to Astrid, things would have been different. She began to sob, remembering how she had reacted when she saw Astrid

that day. That was why she was annoyed with Astrid. Because she had let her appearance go, as if that had been the only reason to love Astrid. Had she been like all the others, only interested in the beautiful but sad and searching Astrid that she knew so well? Yes, she told herself, in that one moment you were no better than the rest. She didn't perform the way she supposed to. She wasn't what you wanted her to be. Yes, you were like all the rest, she told herself, weren't you Maya?