

Word count: approx. 2,650

When Stars Fell From the Sky

After another whiskey-induced blackout, Raymond opens his eyes and squints at the mid-morning light streaming through the transom window. When he'd finally gone to bed around two a.m., the tattoo inside his left wrist had been burning and boiling up like an angry welt. He'd thought he was having an allergic reaction of some sort; to what he didn't know. Now the stinging sensation is gone.

He glances at his wrist. The flame-red starfish tat isn't there anymore. Raymond sits up, too quickly, and dizziness washes over him. Another look at his wrist. Still gone. *What the hell.* He must be hallucinating. On second thought, he wonders whether someone can imagine something disappearing. Isn't it the other way around? Confused and already tired of thinking about it, Raymond falls back onto the bed.

Dread roils in his gut. Another day of designing flyers and brochures for clients (thank god he doesn't have to meet with them in person), followed by too much whiskey. Then rinse and repeat. He wants to go back to sleep, and never wake up. His right arm flops down on the mattress as he rolls over onto his side. His hand lands on something damp and prickly. There, amid the crumpled bed sheets, lies a starfish. It's about five inches, and the same bright red color of the missing tattoo.

Recalling what his daughter had told him, that starfish can only survive out of water for a few minutes, Raymond assumes the sea star is dead. But when he picks it up and places it in the palm of his hand, he can feel its tiny tentacles moving.

He rushes to the kitchen and fills the sink with water and what he guesses is the right amount of Morton's salt. He should take the sea star to the ocean, but as the starfish settles into its new environment, Raymond doesn't want to do that. The sea takes, and the sea gives. He won't squander this second chance.

"How many fish you gonna put in that tank?" the pet store salesman asks as Raymond wrestles a large aquarium into the shopping cart.

"Just one." Raymond wants the starfish to have ample space to move around.

The salesman eyes the tank. "That's pretty big for one fish. Sure you don't want somethin' smaller?"

"Nope. This is the one I want."

Raymond hasn't stepped foot on the beach since the "accident." As he fills the aquarium with sand and plastic plants, his mind drifts to that day. Olivia was swimming close to shore. Steph had gone to the car to get something she'd forgotten.

"Where's Olivia?" His wife had asked when she returned, a hint of urgency in her voice.

Looking up from the book he was reading, Raymond had started to say, "She's right..." but stopped when he didn't see their daughter. "I'll go find her."

He waded into the water, calling Olivia's name, but she didn't answer. He didn't see her head bobbing anywhere. He swam out as far as he had told Olivia she could go. Nothing. He

kept swimming and yelling for her. When he finally made it back to the shore he collapsed on the sand, sobbing.

They were told Olivia had probably been pulled under by a riptide.

“You were supposed to be watching her!” Steph’s accusation still echoes in his brain, a ringing he can never be rid of, along with the immense grief. The drinking is never enough to ease the pain.

Olivia’s bedroom is still exactly as it was the day she died. A few clothes strewn on the carpet, her bed hastily made, and the multitude of baskets and jars filled with beach memorabilia. Olivia had loved their weekend outings to the beach, their long walks along the shore, waves licking their feet and ankles. She collected all kinds of sea shells—but never starfish. She carefully picked up any sea stars she found and placed them back in the ocean.

“Daddy, did you know if a starfish loses an arm, it can grow a new one?” Olivia had said to him one day. She was writing a report on the sea animals for science class.

“I didn’t know that, Pumpkin.”

“And they’re not even fish!” Olivia added with astonishment. “They’re echinoderms”—she said the scientific word slowly—“which means spiny skin, and they’re in the asteroids class. You know, like those things that fly around in space.”

Raymond had chuckled at his daughter’s enthusiasm. “I’m pretty sure matter flying around in space and starfish in the sea are completely different things, Pumpkin.”

On what would have been his daughter’s eleventh birthday, Raymond had gotten the starfish tattoo. Not a typical, dull-orange sea star, but a much rarer, brilliant red one. It wasn’t just a way to honor Olivia; it was also a constant reminder of how he had failed in his most important responsibility as a father.

He thinks of naming his new companion Olivia but can't bear to. He decides on Stella, the Latin word for star.

Raymond is mesmerized by this amazing creature; how Stella moves around the aquarium, even on the glass, using her tiny tube feet; how, when he feeds her clams, mussels, and other mollusks, her little body pulsates as she acts like a can opener, prying open the shell and eating her meal.

As his love for Stella grows, Raymond swears she's also growing. He starts measuring her. Sure enough, she's getting bigger. After a while, he fears Stella might be getting too puffy. The next time he feeds her, he cuts her meal down. She eats her prey and then seems to wait for more. When Raymond reaches into the tank to retrieve her, she scoots away from him. "Stella, don't be that way. I'm only trying to..." He almost says, "protect you," but tears flow before he can get the words out.

Now that he has a companion, Raymond resumes his Saturday morning outings to the diner he used to frequent before the accident. When he walks in, a few customers gaze curiously at the burly man with the scruffy beard toting a starfish in a portable fishbowl with a lid and easy-carry handle.

Raymond knows most of the waitresses by name, but the one who approaches his table is new. She's tall, with strawberry-blonde hair and blue-green eyes the color of the ocean. Her nametag says Claire. "Good morning. What'cha havin' today?"

Raymond orders his usual—two eggs over easy with bacon and hash browns.

“Anything for your friend?”

Raymond gives her a confused look. Claire points her pen at Stella. Raymond is speechless for a moment, then he does something he hasn’t done since Olivia died. He laughs.

“No, thanks, she’s on a diet,” he answers, and it’s Claire’s turn to laugh.

After that, whenever he goes to the diner, Raymond asks to sit in Claire’s station. He catches other waitresses exchanging looks about the starfish and whispering with each other, but Claire never treats him like he’s some weirdo. Her presence is comforting. The grief is always present and, underneath it, rage over the unfairness of it all ebbs and flows like the tide. But for an hour each Saturday, the burden lifts a little and Raymond feels lighter.

The other regulars don’t pay him any mind, except for one guy who always stares at him. It irritates Raymond, but he chooses to ignore the guy.

Until one Saturday. While he waits for his breakfast, the staring guy is nearby, finishing his meal, looking Raymond’s way.

After the customer pays his bill, he comes over to Raymond. “That’s a beautiful starfish, man,” he says.

Raymond looks at him warily. “Thanks.”

“Those red prickly sea stars are really rare. They live in the Pacific, mainly off the coast of Peru and Chile. How’d you get one?”

Raymond moves his hand toward the fishbowl. The man takes his phone out of his pocket and snaps a picture of Stella. For a moment, Raymond is stunned. As the guy turns away from the table, Raymond jumps to his feet and grabs the man’s arm.

“Hey, what are you doing?” The guy says as he tries to shake loose.

“You didn’t ask my permission,” Raymond snarls.

The clatter and chatter around them stop. Raymond maintains his tight grip. He towers over the younger guy, who appears to be in his early twenties to Raymond’s mid-thirties.

“Sorry, man.” The guy raises his free hand in mock-surrender.

The manager comes over to them. “Everything all right here?”

From behind the manager, Claire stares at Raymond, her mouth open in surprise.

Raymond lets go. “We’re good,” he says. The young man walks away, rubbing his arm. Raymond grabs the fishbowl and leaves the diner.

He sits in his car in the parking lot, chastising himself for overreacting, for humiliating himself in front of Claire. This “new” feeling, of caring what Claire thinks about him, makes him squirm. He’s going to be alone the rest of his life. It’s the punishment he’s assigned to himself. And that’s that.

He hasn’t had a drink since Stella showed up, but when Raymond gets home, he wants some whiskey. He goes to his stash in the kitchen, opens the bottle of Wild Turkey, even pours a glass. Holds it up to his nose, closes his eyes, and inhales the aroma of peppermint spice, rye grain, and ethanol that tastes so good and makes his body go numb and his mind shut down.

Raymond sets the glass down. Stares at it. Something inside him shifts ever so slightly. It’s not the whiskey he wants, it’s something else. He walks over to the aquarium. Looks around the dusty, dimly-lit den with the curtains drawn. What kind of life is this for a sea star? For a man who is far from being old?

Raymond goes to the shed behind the house where he had stored some paint for one of Steph's honey-do tasks that he'd never gotten around to. He dusts off the cans and carries them into the house.

At first, after Olivia's death, the door to her bedroom stayed open. Raymond spent time in there, seated on the edge of the twin bed, going over in his mind the moment he let his guard down and took his eyes off his daughter. But Steph couldn't handle seeing Olivia's room, the still life that was left behind. Steph shut the door. After she moved out, it remained closed.

Raymond stands at the door, hand on the knob, and opens it. The blinds are closed, and the room is dim. It smells a little musty, and there's something else. Raymond sniffs. Nail polish. He switches on the light. He hadn't noticed before that Olivia had left the lid off a bottle of nail polish on her vanity. He closes it, then opens the blinds and the window to let in some much-needed light and fresh air.

After moving the vanity, dresser, bookcase, and the bed away from the walls, Raymond spreads out a painter's cloth on the carpet and sets to work. First he paints a shoreline along the bottom of the walls, then the ocean with some waves and, finally, sailboats in the distance.

When he's finished, Raymond moves the aquarium into the room. He takes Stella out of the water and places her next to him on Olivia's bed while he admires his handiwork. "What do you think of that?"

She crawls onto his hand and Raymond can swear she sighs with contentment.

"Me too, my little star."

That night, with Stella safe in her new room, Raymond sleeps peacefully.

A few weeks later he finally gets up the courage to go back to the diner and apologize to Claire for his outburst. He doesn't see her so he stops one of the other waitresses.

"She had to go home. Death in the family," the woman says.

Raymond realizes he doesn't know much about Claire. He hadn't wanted to creep her out by asking a bunch of personal questions.

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

"She's not coming back. Her father passed. Cancer. Her mom's a wreck."

Raymond is sad for Claire's loss but his heart sinks that he might not ever see her again. He hates that the last time she saw him, he acted like an asshole.

The busy waitress walks away.

Raymond sighs and looks down at Stella. "Guess it's just you and me," he says and takes a seat at his regular table. But it's not the same, and he leaves before he orders.

Winter passes and then hurricane season arrives. Raymond lives far enough away from the beach that ocean water won't reach his house, but close enough that strong winds could wreak havoc. A storm is headed toward South Carolina's Lowcountry. "We've got to batten down the hatches," he announces to Stella. He stays close to the aquarium, a battery-powered radio next to him.

After the storm passes, Raymond goes outside to check for damage. Except for some downed tree branches, the homes on his street have weathered the heavy rains and winds.

Back inside, he turns on the television. A reporter is giving a live report at the beach. Thousands of starfish are washing up along the shore. A stream of people—locals and tourists alike—are gathering to see the spectacle. Raymond has heard of this strange phenomenon. He

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hesitates. He hasn't been to the beach since the accident. But when will there be another chance to see something like this?

When Raymond leaves the house, it's unusually dark. He figures a lot of street lights are out, and there's a new moon. At the beach, he walks hurriedly toward the shore, fishbowl in hand.

Past the sand dunes, he stops short. It looks like the entire beach is covered in diamonds. Thousands of twinkling starfish light up the shoreline, as if all the stars had fallen from the sky. Raymond stands there, entranced by the starry show. Maybe Olivia was right. Maybe stars in space and starfish in the sea are the same.

All around Raymond, people are picking up sea stars and returning them to the sea in reverent silence. Raymond doesn't move. He looks down at Stella, then back at the ocean. He takes a step and then another, until he reaches a row of starfish. He sets down the fishbowl, picks up a sparkling sea star and carries it to the water's edge.

He rescues another one, and then another, and another, carrying them all back to the sea. When he's finished, he stares at the ocean. In a blur of tears, he remembers when Olivia lost her first tooth, how she loved to dance to ABBA's Dancing Queen, how he will never walk her down the aisle.

Amid the roar of the ocean, Raymond hears whimpering. He crouches down and lifts Stella out of the fishbowl. Her little body vibrates in his hand. He lifts Stella up to his ear. His little star is whining. He places her back in the bowl. He can't do it.

Raymond feels someone touch his shoulder. He looks up. It's Claire. "It's hard to let go, isn't it?" she says.

Tears fill his eyes, and hers.

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Raymond straightens up and peers into her eyes. They are full of compassion, despite her own grief. He takes a deep breath and picks up Stella's bowl. Claire walks with him. They wade into the waves until they're knee-deep. Raymond tightens his grip on the handle. Claire reaches over and places a hand on his. Her hand is warm and reassuring. Raymond slowly loosens his hold. Gently, Claire helps him lower the bowl and tilt it. Together they watch as the creature Raymond loves most flows into her rightful home. He takes Claire's hand. They stand there in silence, the salt of Raymond's tears flowing out to sea with the tide.

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