

Initial Calculations

Chelsea needed to see the sky. She shoved her laptop aside and slapped it shut. The sofa's broken spring jabbed her back as she scrambled up to head for the kitchen door. The article she'd read online reported that scientists found evidence that an asteroid as big as a city block had once devastated Decorah, Iowa. That wasn't far from where she grew up. Sure, that happened millions of years ago, but recently an asteroid had come closer to earth than the moon, and a meteor over Russia had shattered glass and destabilized buildings with its shock waves. She banged open the screen door and joined her new roommates on the second-story porch where they sat in the dark, the scent of pot thickening the air. They acknowledged her with nods and "heys" as she moved a frayed lawn chair near the railing. Jason handed her a beer. For as long as she could remember, she'd counted on the sky to comfort her, always relied on its steady presence behind passing clouds. Now she searched the sky as if she were an air traffic controller with a failing computer.

She popped the top on the beer and said, "Don't asteroids freak you out?"

Her roommates erupted in laughter. The rickety porch shook in response. She tossed her hair over her shoulder and tipped towards Jason to take the joint he offered, even though she'd promised herself not to tonight.

"Hey, it's not funny." But she giggled for a moment, until she remembered. "Over a thousand people got hurt when a meteor exploded over Russia. And the earth is overdue for a direct asteroid hit. Like about half a billion years overdue. I saw an article with a graphic of an asteroid all like fiery and aiming for us." She waved the joint over her head in a glowing trail, and then paused for another deep inhale before passing it to Matt.

“Yeah, and I heard the Milky Way is eating itself,” Jason said. “Damn candy bars.”

Walls of neighboring houses echoed back the group’s laughter.

“Shut up!” Melvin bellowed from his back door on the first floor of their duplex.

“Sorry, Mel, we didn’t mean to have fun,” Chelsea shouted over the railing even as she regretted it; she liked the old man. Their laughter drowned out Melvin’s reply.

She looked at Jason, lit by a lamp from a window next door. He saluted her with his beer. It drove her crazy that she was attracted to his taut body, long lashes, and eyebrows that arched like his cheekbones. He ran his life on alcohol and Mia had already claimed him, yet he was so good-looking that meeting his dark eyes sent a zinging through her.

Jason burped into his beer can to amplify the sound. She frowned and gulped her beer.

Mia giggled like a child watching a clown, then, in a sweet voice, said, “We better quiet down, don’t you think? We shouldn’t be bothering our new neighbors.” She plucked at the edges of her just trimmed and bleached blonde hair that made her resemble a storybook pixie. Chelsea tensed. Mia could win a congeniality award for her considerate and nice act. Too bad she kept it up only when the guys were around.

“Freedom of speech is what I say,” Jason shouted.

“That doesn’t apply here, dude,” Matt said. He attached a roach clip to the joint, then got up to pass it to Mia. “We’re talking disturbing the peace.” The dim light tinted his sandy hair the green of a stagnant pond.

“Don’t give me that lawyer-to-be shit,” Jason shot back. “I want peace too, like a piece of— never mind. These chicks’ll smack me if I go there.”

“You’re disgusting,” Chelsea said as she tottered up to go inside. Grasping the kitchen doorframe, she glanced over her shoulder. “Make sure you guys don’t leave anything burning, okay?” The storm door closed fast, spanking her.

Matt’s voice seeped through the screen. “Why’s she always saying that?”

“Because she’s hot,” Jason said.

Chelsea’s flip-flop tangled with the leg of a kitchen chair, and she winced at the pain between her toes. They hadn’t a clue how precarious everything was. Her head buzzed from the high, but she’d lost her humor. Rooming with these three was not what she had in mind for life after graduation.

She flopped into the sagging red sofa, its crushed velvet shiny from wear but still irritating to her bare arms. A doomsday scenario played in her mind. She could be driving along in her hand-me-down Chevy, singing with the radio when the Emergency Broadcast System would intrude with its discordant buzz, buzz, buzz. One of those annoying tests. She would hit the button for another station. More buzzing. *This is not a test*, an excited voice would say. *We’re awaiting a message from the President*. A spasm in her stomach. Then the President spoke: “Scientists from NASA’s Near Earth Object Office have informed me that an asteroid is projected to enter the earth’s atmosphere within days. We are working with NASA and the air force to do everything in our power to manage the situation. Stay tuned for further instructions from your local authorities and, above all, do not panic.” Too late. Panic entered every body part, squeezed the air from her lungs. She had to escape, but to where? Her foot punched the gas pedal. Shaking hands floundered on the steering wheel. She almost hit the truck in front of her, almost careened off the road, almost.... Stop it, she scolded herself. Enough of that.

The voices of her roommates penetrated the door and bounced around the apartment: “Dude, where’s the lighter?...Gimmie that beer.” With a lone poster of Nirvana on the wall, a coffee table laden with beer cans, and a small rug that looked as if it lost a fight with a cat, there was nothing to absorb the sound. Her heart also bounced as if an asteroid were, in fact, bearing down on her.

She’d been wrong, so wrong, to have latched onto the first roommate request she’d lifted from the college bulletin board, wrong to have jumped on the first job she could find, one that she would start tomorrow. Why had the choices seemed easy and right at the time? She didn’t want to move back home, that was for sure. It wasn’t until after she accepted the job that she realized the salary from the newsweekly would never be enough to rent her own place and pay her student loans. She was stuck in this dump.

The glare of the ceiling light made the room appear all the more desolate. Moths flew in frantic circles around the dusty glass globe, sometimes crashing straight into it with a clink. She would Google to find out why moths do that, if she wasn’t so out of it.

She saw herself as a moth. Furry chestnut wings lifted her high, took her wherever she wanted to go. She wouldn’t hang around a ceiling light. Not when there was a whole night world to explore. But maybe the moon or Venus would attract her with their light. How long before she would realize her mistake and turn back? Or would she fly on until she had not one flap of her wings left, and go careening down to earth? She felt like she was falling. Her arm flailed against the velvet spikes of the sofa cushion, and she roused.

She shook away her drowsiness. Her eyes caught on the split ends of her hair, and she chose one to delicately rip apart. She had to get out of this bad mood. After all, she was grateful to have a real job in her major, even if it would require reporting on boring suburban council

meetings. She could have done worse, having switched from science to journalism after she'd finally figured out what she wanted, although sometimes doubted that decision, too, and missed viewing the world through a microscope.

Jason and Mia had only been offered dubious sales positions for their marketing degrees. Mia instead opted to clerk in a clothing store where she could buy at a discount, while Jason signed up for a two-week bartending course. Just what he needed, more alcohol in his future. At least Matt had applied to dozens of law schools and got accepted at choice number twenty-six on his list. But then, his great ambition for the summer was to run the rides at an amusement park. While stoned. And sneak friends into the back gate. Too bad Chelsea's close friends hadn't found jobs in Pittsburgh and had to move back to their hometowns. She might have done the same if she'd had a safe home to return to. Instead here she was, feeling more alone than ever.

She flapped around on the sofa to find a more comfortable position. What had happened to her decision not to get high or drunk on the night before starting her new job? The high made her bad mood worse. She fled to her bedroom, to the window that overlooked the alley.

The room she and Mia shared was the only semi-private space where a sliver of sky could be seen. Without flipping on the light switch, she stepped through Mia's part of the room, neat with every last thing in its tidy place. The glass eye of Mia's teddy bear caught the hall light and winked from her bed. The dividing line between their sides was clear. Chelsea considered her half comfortably messy. Mia called it chaotic, but tempered the criticism with a smile that reminded Chelsea of the wax lips sold at Halloween.

She stretched out on her bed, shimmying close to the open window to see the sky above the rooftops. The moist night air licked at her face. Jason's voice drifted in on the breeze and

his body filled her mind, made her body pulsate. She imagined him coming to her as she lay on the bed, imagined him caressing her.

No, don't go there. That direction was full of traps. Must be pheromones, some animal attraction pulling her. How was it she knew his smell?

The mattress sagged, waking her, and her hip twisted and crashed into a body.

"Hey, why'd you disappear like that?" The real-life Jason spoke as he lay down next to her, his breath a mixture of mint and beer. She turned and adjusted to put space between them, but he shifted to rest his thigh against hers. Not wanting to appear a prude, she stayed put. His warmth seeped through her pants near her old scars and scrambled her thoughts.

"I feel like..." She stopped. Confiding in him would probably draw a laugh.

Jason petted her hair, his hand following its full length until it came to rest on her breast. His thumb stroked her nipple. "Is there something I can do to make you feel better?"

What a cheap pick-up line. She groaned and evicted his hand.

A shuffling at the door. Mia flipped on the ceiling light, its sudden glare like an accusation, and said, "I didn't know you guys were ... whatever."

"We're just talking," Chelsea said, and sat up too fast. Her stomach reacted as if someone had shaken the beer inside it, causing the liquid to fizz. "Come on in."

Jason sprung up and said, "Catch you later."

"It's not like it looks," Chelsea said to Mia.

"You don't have to deny it." Mia's tone was singed with anger. "If Jason likes you better—"

"There's nothing to deny."

“Yeah, right.” Mia’s eyebrows took a hike up her forehead. “So you guys want to play it cool. Go ahead.”

“We’re not. I mean we’re not playing anything.”

“Let’s not get into it, okay?” Mia pulled off her tee shirt, grabbed a pink sweater out of her drawer and moved into the doorway without putting it on. Jason and Matt stood the hall and looked towards the room.

“Don’t you want to close the door?” Chelsea gestured towards the hall.

Matt whistled.

Mia turned to face them and took a bow. “You guys aren’t quitting, are you? Let’s party some more.” Mia joined them in the hall before putting on her sweater.

“Yeah, baby,” Matt said, rubbing his palms together. “Come on out, Chelsea.”

“I’ll be there soon,” she said. She doused the bedroom light, and then stood by the window.

The light from the hall superimposed her reflection on the window, obscuring her view of the sky. All she could see was her worried face. She imagined tomorrow, at her new job. White office walls would gleam with the industrial blue of the carpet and cubicles. There was her empty desk and a blank screen. She would have to write good, creative copy every week. Could she do the work? She would try her best. She’d spent her life trying her best. But was that enough? Was capricious Fate stalking her? Her heart raced. You never knew what might happen. What if her boss sensed her fear as it oozed through the exposed cubicle? It could make him want to prey on her. His condescending manner had intimidated her when she’d met him at the interviews. Her breath quickened. What if he was a malcontent full of anger? Unfair, even

mean. What if he told her that her first article sucked, readers would hate it, there was no future for her in journalism? She would shrivel under his heat. Her shrunken lungs couldn't take in air.

Hyperventilating, she sat on her bed and squeezed the pillow with tight fists. There wasn't enough air in the room, like when her dad would come home punch drunk, or when a truck had lost its brakes, blew through a red light and crumpled her car, igniting it as if it were paper. In the ambulance, she'd carried the fire in her lungs and believed she was dying. So hard to get a deep breath. Stroking her thigh in slow motion where skin grafts covered the burn scars, she labored to match her breathing to the rhythm.

At last, her effort to breathe normally succeeded – this time anyway. Best efforts mattered so little in the face of unpredictable forces of destruction.

Lying down, she looked at the sky again. She'd once read that astronomers, in 2004, almost woke President Bush to alert him of an imminent asteroid impact. Right before they placed the call, they discovered their initial calculations had been rash; the asteroid would miss the earth by millions of miles.

But another asteroid might be headed for the earth, and in the meantime, it was too easy to make wrong life choices, like a moth banging against a ceiling light. How was she supposed to live knowing that?

Maybe it was better to party all night long and forget about trying to shape her future. Might as well sleep with Jason. And Matt, too, what the hell. Why take a job with demands, where her hard work might be irrelevant, when she could join Mia at the clothing store or Jason at the bar or take the summer off to mess around like Matt before she had to face what was next?

She needed fresh air, and headed out to the back porch. Jason caught her eye, patted the lawn chair next to him. She shook a silent “no” and headed down the staircase, holding tight to

the railing of the wobbling structure. When she reached the ground, Matt called to her, asked where she was going. She kept on moving, their voices a tin echo. Melvin's first floor apartment was dark except for the flicker of a TV, its volume on high. She passed rot-framed windows with more TV voices escaping into the night and old cars parked nose to tail in the cobblestone street. The hills in this neighborhood conspired with the close-packed houses to hide much of the sky, almost snuffing out the life below. So hard to find an expansive view. Like the one from her childhood when she would lie on the grass watching clouds sail past stars in the wide-open sky. Up ahead on the hilltop, stood a burned out streetlight in front of an unlit house. She strode towards it.

Why had she let fears of an asteroid crash pollute the lasting beauty she'd always seen in the sky? She longed for something more spacious than her crowded thoughts. Leaning against the pole for support, she tilted her head up.

She turned her attention to the sky and absorbed the light-splattered blackness above. Constellations and dim stars hinted of far off galaxies. What if she were floating in space, gazing down at her world? Her earth self would be a dot, her fear a single bacterium unable to harm its host.