

Celestial Significance

The late fall sky glowed orange and purple as dusk descended on my family's truck. We passed short, dark pine trees and the cab of the vehicle bounced around violently on the partially paved road up the mountain. My head kept hitting the cold, small, glass window in the back seat, and I began to get a headache.

"Are we almost there?" I asked the back of my Dad's head. His white hair reflected a ghostly glow from the light of my sister's iConnect. He didn't answer. The message Roxy had sent to her friend had been denied passage five times that night. She put her finger to the Blue device in her ear and pressed the button to send it a sixth time.

"You should wait until we're at the top, reception might be better up there," I said to Roxy. She looked over at me, and then picked up the iConnect again. It was a thin screen that could be folded up, but contained all the inner workings of the laptops that were used ten years ago. She could normally connect instantly to any network with the Blue, but tonight, with all the electromagnetic activity going on, it seemed doubtful that it would work.

"Don't tell me how to use my stuff," she said. I dropped the subject. Mother turned on a Christmas song.

"It's too early for Christmas music. Why are we listening to this?" I asked Mother. She didn't reply. We both enjoyed music, but for very different reasons.

"Mother, this music is annoying!" I said to her.

"You guys are annoying!" Roxy said, looking up from her device.

"Don't forget your promise Izzy," Dad said. His eyes shifted to the rearview mirror and the whites of them glowed momentarily before Roxy's Connect screen went black, and the cab was plunged into darkness. I looked from my younger sister to our mother again. It didn't seem

worth the effort to be nice to either of them when I was so irritated. Roxy's head was resting against the window and she was staring up at the night sky. It was getting harder to believe that Roxy was ever going to change, or that Mother would take a stand against Roxy's attitude.

Last week I had come home from college to a sullen family. My sister was sitting at the kitchen table, and Dad was standing over her. Mother was preparing dinner, trying her best to ignore the fact that tension was heavy in the air.

"Is everything okay?" I asked. Dad looked at me, but returned his stare to my sister.

"God, I know you want me to be more like her! You don't even have to say it, Father," Roxy yelled. Mother dropped a metal bowl into the sink, and the clang resounded through the kitchen. Dad crossed his arms and shook his head.

"I just can't believe it; after all the help you've had. How could you just throw it all away?" Dad yelled loud enough for the neighbors to hear. The hairs on the back of my neck rose. Roxy must have done something truly terrible to have Dad yelling. Mother left the room. I followed her to the living room.

"What has she done?" I asked her. She was sitting on the floral couch that had been passed down from Dad's parents to us. It was worn with the years of use, but was loved dearly for its memories.

"God, what didn't she do?" Mother said. "I just wish your father wouldn't yell like that."

I went back to the kitchen and reached the doorway just as Roxy was on her way out.

"Get the hell out of my way," she said, her eyes flashing blue behind her thin, black hair. I stepped out of the way.

It was that night I had turned on the TV, the only way I knew how to diffuse Dad's anger, and tuned into the news. The anchor was sitting behind his wide desk, eyes glued to the screen with an air of indifference while he reported on the recent electromagnetic activity from solar wind; eruptions of charged particles from sunspots. The findings from astrophysicists revealed that the recent activity was heightened because the crack discovered in the ozone layer thirteen years ago had widened, allowing for more of the solar flares to reach Earth's atmosphere. The Northern Lights had never reached down to Connecticut before. Power had been lost to millions of homes in New England.

Dad and I sat transfixed to the television screen as newscasters scattered throughout New England reported small disasters that had been caused by the outage. We were lucky to still have our power, so Mother could finish preparing dinner. I had never seen the Northern lights before, and when a photo of them taken in northern Connecticut by a viewer was shown, I rushed to the window and peeked through the curtains to see if they had reached us. Dad followed me to the window.

"Can you see anything?" The night sky was still tinged with the blue of the day, but there were no lights yet. I shook my head. We sat back down in front of the TV. The tone of the newscaster had changed. He reported that thousands of people had flocked to local mountains, and impromptu night watches were set up. The smiling faces of people from New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine looked cold, but glad to be out in the night watching the sky. My heart began to grow with the hope that Dad would want to go out and see them.

"What are you guys doing? David, I need some help. The microwave stopped working," Mother said from the kitchen doorway. Dad and I looked at each other. I got goose bumps. Just as he got off the couch green light flashed through the living room, and our power went out.

“David, where are you?” Mother said.

“I’m right here Sheryl, calm down. We’ve just lost power. Izzy, go look outside,” Dad’s voice hovered above the couch. My eyes were slowly adjusting, and I could see a fuzzy black shape where he stood. I felt my way to the window and pulled open the curtains. Sparks were spewing from one of the telephone poles near our house, but other than that the town was dead. As far as I could see up and down the street houses were dark. In the sky green haze clung to the bottoms of the clouds. A purple wave of light danced near the moon. I gripped the curtains.

“Oh my—guys, come look at this,” I called back to my parents.

“What the heck is going on?” Roxy said from behind me. She had been up in her room, and had been forced out of hiding when we lost power. I suspected she was afraid of being alone in the dark, but she would never admit to it.

“Come see,” I said, moving over in the window to let her look. She sidled up close to me, but I didn’t mind. A chill was already creeping through our old town house, and Dad hadn’t turned on our heat yet in an effort to save money. I wondered how many blankets I would have to sleep with that night.

“Okay, that’s freaky. What is it?” she asked.

“What’s happening Izzy?” Dad said from right behind me. He had snuck up without me noticing, and I jumped. “Hey, it’s just me. Let me see.”

“Scaredy cat,” Roxy said. I punched her arm and moved out of the way for Dad.

“It’s the Aurora Borealis,” I said, pointing above Dad’s head to the clouds.

“The what?” Roxy asked.

“I can’t see very well,” Dad said. He went to the front door and opened it. The cool autumn air crept in. Roxy and I went over to stand behind him. The view from the door was magnificent, but the lights were already starting to fade.

“They don’t last very long, do they?” Dad said. Roxy had left, and I suspected she was sitting on the couch trying her iConnect and Blue device.

“Those are not going to work,” I said.

“Seriously?” Roxy groaned from behind me. “What the heck am I supposed to do all night?”

“Shut that door,” Mother’s voice came from the kitchen. “Does no one want to eat?” Dad shut the door and found a flashlight in the hallway trunk. It flickered a few times before throwing a strong beam out across the living room. The hulking shapes of the couch and chairs loomed in the dark like creatures of the night. Roxy’s head was down on one of the arm rests of the couch.

“Come on, let’s eat,” Dad said. The kitchen was a little warmer, and Mother had already lit some candles. She was sitting down and helping herself to some food. Dinner was a mishmash of items; leftovers from other nights, some partially heated by the microwave before we lost power, and others heated in pots on our propane stovetop. I silently thanked the sellers of this house that they had kept the old stove and not installed a fancy new electric one.

“Dad, the reporter said that these storms were supposed to go on for a week. Can we go to the mountain to see it?” I asked, taking my seat at the table.

“Roxy get in here,” Mother called. Roxy was shuffling into the kitchen.

“I’m here! Geez, you don’t have to yell,” she said.

“I think that’s a great idea. We all need some fresh air, and some family time,” Dad said, aiming the last comment at Roxy.

“Can’t it wait until we have power again?” Mother asked through a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

“Don’t know when we’ll get it back again,” Dad said.

When we left a week later, we still didn’t have power. Provisions were packed in the truck bed and we were headed south to stay with some relatives. Dad had insisted that we take a small detour to Peak Mountain, the only local one close enough to us. Tonight was supposed to be the height of the electrical storms caused by the sun and it wasn’t something Dad was going to miss.

I shifted on the vinyl seat uncomfortably.

“I know this is supposed to be fun, but my back hurts from sitting so long,” I said. I thought I heard Roxy say “old fart”, but I decided not to take offense this time.

“I’m not having fun,” Mother mumbled. Dad’s hands tightened on the steering wheel.

I had promised Dad that I would not argue with Mother when we had packed to leave. My college had lost power too, so I was stuck with my family, instead of going back for classes after the break. I kept my opinions about what we were going to witness to myself, because I didn’t want to start a discussion with Mother about it. She had expressed her distaste for anything to do with science many years ago after the Great Depletion, and it was a heated topic in our family. I agreed that the ozone layer could be thicker, but I didn’t entirely blame it on science. She claimed that science had messed around too much with the natural order of the planet. She used this as an excuse too for many of her imagined ailments and increased laziness.

Mother looked back at me and it was all I could do to ignore her. In the dark of the truck cabin I could only see her prominent chin and the flash of her glasses in the light of Roxy’s

device. Mother had not wanted to go to the mountain and blamed me as the catalyst for our side trip. She shifted back around and the crooning Christmas music got a little louder. At least I knew that I had Dad's support, I thought as I turned my eyes to the stars above through the window. The smell of warm vinyl seats mixed with fake pine air freshener permeated the air. It reminded me of another cold, fall night, when I was about seven.

Dad had heard about it at work and of course wanted to check it out. At eight-thirteen exactly, Dad, Roxy, and I stood on the little wooden porch attached to our trailer at the old mobile home park and looked up at the red-orange moon.

"It's an eclipse over the harvest moon," Dad explained. "Only time it will happen in my life." He popped his head back into the trailer. "Are you coming out, Sheryl?"

Mother was inside playing a computer game and would not stop in time to witness the full eclipse. She didn't like the cold air or craning her neck back to see the sky.

The proximity of the moon to the earth that night seemed way to close. The red face felt hot and imposing. I remember my sister had dropped her stuffed animal over the side of the porch railing and had wailed for Dad to retrieve it. Her cries had broken my reverie of the impressive display of the cosmos.

"Don't be such a baby. This is cool, not scary," I said. Roxy's fear had won over her curiosity and she took her dirty stuffed animal back inside to watch the stupid computer game Mother was playing.

The next stage of the eclipse had been a shock to me and forever lies distorted in my memories. When the celestial bodies continued on their separate paths, the naked white of the

moon was exposed as a thin sliver. The red color seemed to have broken and the discarded piece was hanging on by a hinge. It looked like the moon had been wounded.

“Okay, we’re here,” Dad said as I felt the truck slow. I shook myself out of my memory and back to the present night. Red taillights shone through the night ahead of us. There was a line of cars stopped on the road.

“Come on, we’ll miss the show,” Dad said checking his watch. “What’s the holdup?”

It was three-twenty A.M. What scientists were calling the “Arian Dance”, didn’t start for another hour. The Aurora Borealis activity would reach its peak tonight, but the night was supposed to be so clear so that we could see the Milky Way and a possible meteor shower too. I rolled down my window to look ahead of us. The cold air saturated my skin through my clothes and I hugged myself to keep warm.

I had always loved the night sky, an interest I inherited from Dad. The show was supposed to be part of the natural system of the sun’s life span, but in the year 2030, I found it difficult to believe that the astrophysicists didn’t have some hand in changing Earth’s atmosphere to make viewing of the phenomena possible after all. Messing with the balance of Earth was not a good idea in my mind, but if it was for entertainment, humans had long not been opposed to endangering the planet.

We inched towards the cause of the holdup. A small white booth was placed in the middle of the road and a young woman was hanging out of a window in the side of it. The driver in the car ahead of us handed the woman cash and she handed back a ticket.

“You’ve got to be kidding me! It’s only been a week,” Dad said.

“Are they making people pay?” I whispered to Roxy. She briefly looked up from her device and shrugged. I shook my head. Roxy was sucked into her device again and now that we had better reception on top of the mountain she didn’t seem to care about anything else. Mother turned down the music as we pulled up to the booth. Dim florescent lighting reached Dad’s tired face, but no further into the car.

“What’s this all about?” Dad asked. I glanced back and saw another car approaching us from behind. Mother adjusting her purse on her shoulder brought my attention front again, and I saw her looking at the woman in the booth. Mother reached her hand towards Dad’s arm, but he moved it out of her reach. The young lady smiled.

“Welcome, we’re so glad you could make it.” Her smile was forced and hurried. She was finishing up the last transaction that had come through.

I snorted at her.

Mother gave me a threatening look; one that told me to mind my manners.

“Are you parking or dropping off?” The woman asked, giving her full attention to Dad.

“We just want to see the Northern Lights tonight,” he said.

“Well you can park,” the woman suggested.

“How much does it cost?” Dad asked with a hint of caution in his voice.

She flicked her straight brown hair and said, “Eighty dollars.”

“What?” Dad asked.

Mother grabbed his arm as a signal to leave. “David, we really don’t have the money,” she said.

“That’s crazy,” he shouted. We were all watching him, a car honked in line behind us. Everyone waited to see what he would do next.

“David, let’s go,” Mother said, pulling on his arm. Dad shrugged out of her grip.

“Dad, you don’t have to pay! The show is outside, in the whole sky. How can they charge us for that?” I said to him. He looked from me to Mother and then folded his arms in front of his chest with an air of authority. He looked up at the heavens through the windshield, which already displayed an impressive array of pinprick stars, for an answer. Dad’s lips were pressed into a thin line, and his round, unshaven jaw twitched.

“Don’t worry about it.” He turned and handed the woman a silver credit card. She gave him back a couple of pamphlets. Dad took them and passed them back to me and Roxy. I took the one with the large picture of the Northern Lights on the front and gave Roxy the other one.

She looked at the one I gave her and then grabbed mine from my hands.

“Hey, I was looking at that.” I tried to snatch the pamphlet back. She held it out of the way and handed me the one that she had been looking at. It was one about the science behind the Aurora Borealis. Depletion of our ozone layer had allowed the electromagnetic waves from the sun flares to enter our atmosphere. The reaction between the waves and particles in Earth’s atmosphere caused the curtains of colors to dance in the late fall skies in the Northern Hemisphere. Blah, Blah; I already knew all of this.

“You can have it back when I’m done,” she said. I dropped the pamphlet and gave up.

A loud beep came from inside the booth.

“I’m sorry, it was declined,” she said, handing Dad’s card back. He snatched it from her and wouldn’t make eye contact with anyone. It felt like a stone had been dropped in my stomach. Dad jerked the car into drive and pulled a sharp u-turn around the booth.

Roxy’s Blue went off; her message had been re-writ, and she was wasting no time with a response. I looked back out the window at the vast night sky and wished that we could have just

one pleasant family outing. Dad looked back at us and sighed. The tension in the small cab was palpable. The show was predicted to start in half an hour.

“Do you want to find somewhere else, or should we just give it up?” Mother asked in a low voice.

“I think we can find another place, we just need a high enough spot,” I said quietly so that only Dad could hear.

“We’ll see,” Dad said. We drove down the bumpy mountain road in silence until Dad took a sharp left turn. I slid into Roxy and shouted. Mother gripped her door handle. Dad’s eyes were dead set on the thin tire tracks of the small road.

“What in God’s name? David, you’re going to get us lost,” Mother yelled at him. He accelerated. Tree branches hit the windshield and scratched the side windows.

“We’re going to see the light show,” he said. I caught his eyes in the rear-view mirror, and we smiled at each other.

“Really, David,” Mother said. She crossed her arms and wouldn’t look at Dad. Roxy leaned into me and looped her arm through mine. I was surprised by this gesture, but relished in her momentary show of affection. The road became steeper the higher we climbed. Dad pushed the truck to its limits until we came over a ridge to a small plateau. He slammed on the brakes and the truck skidded towards the edge of a cliff. Roxy tightened her grip on my arm and Mother flung her arms into the back seat, trying to get to us.

“Come on, Stop!” Dad shouted. The truck stopped with one wheel halfway over the cliff. We all sat very still. Slowly Dad shifted the truck into reverse, and backed up so that all four tires were on solid ground. “Is everyone okay?” he asked quietly. Mother shifted back to the

front seat and I could see a thin line of tears rolling down her cheek. All that could be heard in the cabin of the truck was a chorus of ragged breathing.

“You almost killed us,” Mother whispered through her teeth. She was staring straight into the sky beyond the cliff. I was shivering from the adrenaline rush. Roxy was cutting off the circulation to my arm with her grip.

Dad didn’t respond, but climbed out of the truck and slammed the door. He took a few steps to the side; testing how much land we had available to stand on. I checked the time again. We had ten minutes until the show started. The night sky opened in front of us; the perfect view.

“Shit!” Roxy said, let go of my arm and threw up the hood on her sweatshirt.

“Roxy! Really?” I said.

Mother was silent.

“We could have just watched it from the road,” she said, and got out of the truck, leaving Mother and I alone.

“Can you believe her?” I asked. Silence filled the cabin, seeping into the cracks in the seats.

“He’s so childish,” Mother said. I knew this, but Dad had only been trying to make us happy.

“Well,” I paused, trying to think of something to diffuse Mother.

“Your dad really loves you girls.” She wiped away her tears; I felt myself blush.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I didn’t even want to come. I’m so tired,” she said and then closed her eyes.

“He did this for you too, you know. We have five minutes until the show starts.”

“You go on and stand out there in the cold,” she replied without opening her eyes.

Selfish woman, I thought as I got out of the truck.

I slammed the door and walked over to where Dad and Roxy stood. Dad put his arms around our shoulders and squeezed.

“I’m sorry. That was stupid.” I shrugged and adjusted my footing. Roxy sat down. Dad and I joined her on the hard rock bed. It was easy for me to forgive Dad, but as I thought through it, I began to understand where Mother was coming from. Dad had put us all in unnecessary danger for a light show.

“I’m cold,” Roxy said. It was too dark to see where Roxy was looking, but I felt as if she were just staring off into the deep, starlight pricked sky. I wondered what she was thinking, and when I would be able to ask her about her problems.

My conversation with Mother had left me feeling hollow, and I glanced back at the truck.

“Do you think she will join us?” I asked. The breeze blew across the exposed cliff; a snaking cold slithered into all the openings in my clothes.

“Knowing her, I don’t think so,” Dad replied. “We should have let her go on ahead of us in her own car, like she wanted.”

“Seriously Dad,” I said. Dad stood with a sigh.

“Where are you going?” Roxy asked. I wasn’t surprised to see her face lit up by her iConnect again. She had a fine, small face; one inherited from Mother’s sister.

“I’ll be back. Put that thing away,” he said, and then headed back to the truck.

I watched the sky as stars began to fall. I felt something stir within me and I knew that I was in the right place, even though my family was a mess. The sky brightened as brilliant hues of blue and green began to dance in front of our eyes. A purple streak flashed through the sky, lighting the whole valley below us. I felt Roxy move closer to me and lean her head on my

shoulder. I found her cold fingers with mine. Her device was finally put away. I turned my head momentarily to see where Dad was, and I could see his silhouette against the side of the truck. He was standing at the open driver's side door, but the interior light was out. I thought about the electricity in the sky above us. Hopefully Dad would come back soon.

I looked back at the night sky and could see millions of stars, some falling, others in brilliant clusters. The Milky Way was always a breathtaking sight. There was no moon, which made the stars and Northern lights jump out brighter against the dark canvas of the night.

We sat in silence; only puffs of our breath clouded the night air in front of us. I didn't hear them approach, but I felt Mother's hand land on my shoulder. Dad sat down on the ground beside me. The cosmos silently danced in front of our eyes, and under the vast beauty of the universe, the problems of our family grew smaller for only a moment.