

Hubble's Constant

1

It was April, warm and windy, but the plaza fountains were still dry. A pair of bronze children played in the non-existent water.

Hands in his coat pockets, Errol Henchin crossed the street as he left the campus. It had been another long day of classes. Today they had calculated the variable infalls of galaxies in the Virgo cluster using Hubble's constant (H_0 ($H=R(t)/R(t)$)).

He walked the extra block to the store. After Delaney disappeared Errol had sold his car, even though he needed it. Another act of The Stranger. The Stranger left his toothbrush in the freezer, chatted with telemarketers, started the washer when it was empty... He admitted he was behaving in ways he could not comprehend, acts of will coming from some mysterious source.

"Who are you?" his wife would say.

He bought a six-pack and a bag of Skittles. The sun was disappearing behind the mountains. In the lobby of his apartment building the mailman was stuffing mail into the boxes, his gold keys glinting in the last light... What day was it? Errol almost asked, but the man looked busy. Not until he was in his apartment did he notice the divorce papers amid the clutch of mail. The previous ones had gone missing somehow. He threw off his coat and put five beers in the fridge.

Three years.

One bag of Skittles.

He didn't even like Skittles. But he must have bought them for a reason.

On his desk was a heap of papers. Bills, syllabuses, alumni news, test schedules.

In all the mess there was probably the original divorce papers. But the only thing he paid attention to lately was his Trumpet. He was fascinated by a mathematical concept known as Torricelli's Trumpet, a problem first introduced in the 1600s. It posited a geometric shape with finite volume and infinite surface: $f(x) = 1/x$ for $x \in$ of $[1, \infty)$, with the surface area revolving around the elongated stem of the hypothetical trumpet.

Finite. Infinite.

Like breathing.

The police called...

Also on his desk was a copy of *The Divine Comedy*, picked up by The Stranger at the college library. Actually what interested him were the Doré illustrations. As a break from his calculations he perused the engravings of the damned: the thieves, the hypocrites, the murderers.

The detective was extremely sorry...

Errol reached for the rainbow: but the bag was empty. Then he saw it was almost three-thirty. He glanced at his bed. A shadow climbed.

!?!

No, nothing.

His heart raced. He got another beer, the last.

Above his desk was a drawing by his soon-to-be ex: a mustachioed face saying, "To Errol is *Divine*." From the old days. Next to it were several Delaney had done. Trees. Houses. Ponies. And his own attempt at a drawing: $E = mc^2$ in different colors. In the corner Delaney had scribbled "LOVE DADY!!"

Up and up on the mini-trampoline...

*Flaxen hair flying, suspended $\Delta/t=m_1*m_2$ for a flashing half-second before falling... infalling...*

Laughing...

The bedroom trampoline had been another one of his indulgences--Mom opposed it, but it was for Dady's girl. Cramped at the Little Pony desk, he would help with her homework, crossing numerators and denominators, while she bounced and bounced, flinging skinny arms. Then he captured her. Kissed her, tucked her into bed.

Kiss! Kiss! Kiss...!

Kiss equals mc^2 ...!

?

Bzzz bzzz!

The phone, somewhere. Errol groaned, sat up. Light filtered through the blinds. It was morning. Or afternoon.

Lifting himself off the floor, bones cracking, he rubbed his face. Then the old terror hit: it was the police to say they had not found her. She was missing.

Bzzz bzzz!

Three years now. Presumed dead.

He took a sip of whiskey. A good way to kill mouth bacteria, so he assumed. He had never bothered to research the idea.

Bzzz bzzzzz!

Phone.

The voice stung his ear: "There you are! I've been calling all morning! I thought maybe you were out, doing something...?"

"No," he said. Grimacing, he kneaded his lower back. "I'm home."

"Of course you are. You're in that apartment too much."

His bladder pinched. "So, Mom? I have to--"

"I have news about your brother. Lorne made me promise I wouldn't tell you, but I just have to! *I have to!*"

"No, Mom..." With the phone to his ear he kicked beer cans and stepped over piles of clothing to the toilet. He fumbled with his fly. "Please don't. Just let Lorne--"

"He asked Eugenia to marry him!"

"What?"

"And she said yes!"

The phone slipped, plopped (*kerplopp!*) into the toilet.

Two months later they were at the airport. Mother sat on a bench, luggage at her feet. She tapped her fingers on the purse held in her lap.

"Where are they? We're going to miss our flight!"

Errol said nothing. He sipped his coffee, not tasting it.

"Are you sure you're okay? You've been acting very strange."

He was fine, he said again. But the idea of the wedding bothered him. It didn't feel right. Everyone in the family had been devastated by Delaney's disappearance, but as the father he should have been the first to get something, be the first to have something good. Something like healing joy. Instead it was Lorne. The idiot. But, no, he was happy for his younger brother. Of course he was. Happy. Happy.

"Oh, I hate this. I hate it when people are late. Lorne jokes about it being Brazilian time. It's not funny."

Eugenia was from Brazil. A former professional basketball player, she had played for the Houston Comets and other teams. Lorne had been a mascot at one of her games when she plowed into him chasing an errant ball. He suffered a concussion--a concussion of *love*, as he put it later. Repeatedly. Now they were going to settle in Los Angeles as she coached at UCLA and he looked for acting jobs.

"There he is!"

Wearing a black KEEP CALM *and* KICK ON t-shirt, Lorne was a few inches shorter than his fiancée. Eugenia bent down to hug Mother, and then Errol. Yes, Brazilian. Somewhere far, far away. Where he wished he was. For a brief moment, he glanced up into Eugenia's eyes: *will you take me to your home planet?*

"What is wrong with you? We were supposed to meet here an hour ago!"

"Chillax, Ma-ma," Lorne said. He laughed, a honking sound that was like Delaney's laugh. He also bounced in place.

Mother frowned. "Where is your luggage? Did you not pack a single thing?"

"Genie's got my stuff in her suitcase." He turned to Errol, hand up for five. "You excited for us, bro?"

Errol raised his hand reluctantly--and Lorne jabbed him in the ribs, a maneuver that went back to grade school.

"Gotcha!"

"Yeah. You did."

Lorne carried a sandwich baggie full of checkers. He rattled it in Errol's face.

"Ready to take me on?"

"What, in checkers?"

"I thought we could play on the flight."

Once in the air they used a torn sheet of notepaper with hand-drawn squares.

Lorne honked every time he got triple-jumped.

3

Errol was in his hotel room, refilling his flask, when his phone buzzed.

Zip me pls

Tucking the flask in his tuxedo jacket, Errol went to the adjacent room. Mother stretched her face in anguish.

"I can't get the zipper!"

"Okay, hold on."

Billows of Mother's sea-green dress hugged her large body. Pinned at her shoulder was a gold brooch of Amphitrite. Errol had been assigned a tie pin of Poseidon.

"Actually, it's stuck."

"Oh, no! It can't be!"

"Oh, wait... Okay, got it."

Errol's fingers were shaking; his mouth was dry.

"Oh, why are they making me wear this naked woman?"

"She's the ocean goddess, Mom."

"But she's NAKED."

With a sigh Errol went out on the balcony overlooking the beach. He took a nip. Tiki torches were planted around a cluster of white-draped chairs. From somewhere came the voice of The Stranger, as deep as Poseidon's:

Don't want to. I'll escape.

Run away.

Disappear.

"Errol! How do I look? Is this okay in the back?"

Errol stepped inside. "It's fine, Mom. You look great."

"Father Dave loves weddings. It's too bad he couldn't come. He's a wine connoisseur, you know. When he [yawwwwn] went down to Gaucamole to help needy children he [talking through her yawns] taught them [uwaeeggghh!] all about wine...! Oh, goodness!"

"I hope he brought them a side of chips, too. Anyway, I'm thinking I might skip the toast tonight. I don't have anything to say. Why do I have to say anything?"

"You're the best man. You have to!"

Errol rubbed at his forehead. "I don't want to. Can't I skip it?"

"Lorne would be miserable if you didn't."

"Would he."

"Yes! Though I understand that he annoys you. He annoys *me*. I really think he didn't get enough oxygen as a fetus. Do you think that's it?"

"I have no idea, Mom."

"Are you telling me you have nothing prepared? You can't do this for your brother?"

Mother stood before the mirror, squirming inside her billows. Tiny lines were etched across her plump, youthful face. Having drastically lost weight after Delaney had gone missing, she was now putting it back on. Errol found himself offended by each pound she gained: they were units of forgetting, of Delaney's oblivion.

"Are you listening to me? This is your brother's wedding!"

"I don't know. I don't like making toasts, I guess."

"What's the problem? You speak in front of your students all the time."

"It's not that."

"Just speak from the heart."

Ugh.

They were a race of Amazons. After the ceremony, Eugenia and her friends autographed basketballs. As phones flashed, Eugenia fanned out her hand next to her new husband's: bigger! The wedding party sat at tables decorated with miniature hoops and stuffed stegosaurus. Eugenia's father looked a bit like Poseidon with his white beard and champagne glass held aloft like a trident; he made a toast in broken English. Then, utensils chiming on flutes, it was time for Errol.

Don't care. I want to die.

Among the faces was a blonde woman, a friend and teammate of Eugenia's. Harper. He'd met her before the ceremony, her warm, sympathetic eyes searching his with an unsettling intensity. Had Eugenia told her about his tragedy? He rose with his glass, less than trident-like, smiled tightly.

"Ah, I'm Lorne's brother. I guess everyone knows that. I'm... I just wanted to say there was this one time once when Lorne went to the bathroom once... and he made this huge mess. You know, diarrhea. And... Ah, er..."

Silence. Distant cough.

What are you doing?

"I just mean he won't make a mess of this. He won't. Even though he doesn't deserve someone so great like Eugenia. Hey, uh, she'll have to use her rebounding skills when she has to dump him and look for someone new. Yeah, right?"

Chuckles. Someone was translating into Portuguese for Eugenia's father. He grunted as if riding a mechanical bull.

"But all joking aside... He's my brother, and... I love him?"

"Hear! Hear!" Lorne shouted, hoisting his glass.

"But... also, also... I just wanted to say this, too... About my daughter...
Delaney... I just, ah, I hope we never forget her. She loved weddings, and she always..."

Eyes. Blue, shining stars. Harper was touched, maybe?

Errol cleared his throat, a sudden odd bleat. "But! Anyway, I wish you all
happiness. To the happy couple!"

5

Errol sat on the beach, tie and cummerbund off. The sun melted: a red-bronze trumpet of light fanned across the void. The paper wasn't going well. He couldn't get the natural algorithm of a to integrate in Riemannian geometry. But did it even matter? His job was secure. The dean told him take all the time he needed.

Time: breath of infinity.

Delaney.

Even over the ocean he could hear the ringing in his left ear. From the time he'd thrown himself through a glass door, through his reflection, thanks to The Stranger. A million cuts, a jagged scar over his eye. *How does someone just disappear?!? HOW?!*

Bzzzzz-- An insect orbiting his cochlear. Music of the spheres.

He tilted his head: the ocean muted. Water flashed azure, violet, foaming curls expanded across the dark sand, scattering pearls--

"Hey."

Startled, Errol looked around.

"Oh, hi! Hello there."

Harper smiled. "That was a really terrible toast."

"Yeah... it was bad, sorry, but, ah, I..."

"I'm kidding, actually. I thought it was funny."

Her voice was low, drawling, a tone of dull sarcasm at variance with her bright, happy smile.

"Thanks. You were probably the only one."

Perfect white teeth. And in a white sarong, her blonde hair pinned in a matrix of intricate, female meaning.

"Well, anyway, it was nice meeting you. A really beautiful wedding."

"Yeah."

Harper scanned the ocean, as if looking for her seashell.

"Okay, I'll see you."

"Sure, sure."

Errol watched her pad over the sand. Calves, buttocks, strong shoulders, hair streaming. From the depths The Stranger spoke.

"Hey! You want to join me?"

Harper turned. "Are you sure? You seem lost in thought, or whatever."

"No, no. I've... I have this?" Errol held up his flask.

"Oh! Now you've got me!"

She sat down beside him, legs crossing effortlessly: yoga posture. Stars fitfully peeped out. A searchlight roamed the zodiac like a lazy metronome; they passed the flask back and forth.

He broke the silence: "You're up there."

"I'm sorry?"

Errol pointed the flask. "Lyra, the harp. You see it? The four points."

"That's a harp? I don't see it."

She took a drink. Then she laughed.

"Oh, I get it! My name."

"It was a dumb joke."

She squinted. "I still don't see a harp..."

It hit him: her teeth were like Farrah Fawcett's. Perfectly aligned, heavenly white, head thrown back, an angel. He'd mention the resemblance except he wasn't sure she'd understand the reference. How old was she?

"I was terrible in astronomy," she said, sounding young. "I thought it'd be an easy science credit, but it was so hard! Too much math for me."

"Yeah. It's not for everyone."

She slipped out of her sparkly sandals. Painted nails. She flexed and burrowed her toes in the sand.

Wiggly, little piggly piggies, Delaney giggled...

"I don't want to cause a panic, but..." Errol tipped over the flask: empty.

"Oh, no!" Harper laughed. "My friend is tending bar at a place around here..."

She craned her neck at the boardwalk.

"We should probably get back. I've been anti-social enough."

"Let's drop by there first. We can get a free drink!"

"Okay." Errol smiled. "You've got me."

They wandered the streets, at last finding the bar. It was raucous, packed. Mostly men in ties, some wearing nametags.

"Like a frat party in here!" Harper shouted to Errol.

Errol scanned the faces. No one from the wedding; no one who knew about his toast. Harper leaned over the counter and talked to the bartender, a young man with a bushy beard and neck tattoo. Nearby a bald man grinned, and said:

"Hey! How's the weather up there?"

Harper handed Errol his drink. She waved off his offered twenty.

"Jeesh, I've never been with a woman so tall! My wife, she's a little thing..."

Harper looked over the bald man's head.

"I suppose you could toss me around in the bedroom, right? Ha, ha, ha!"

Harper frowned at Errol. Together, drinks in hand, they made their way over to the buffet table. There was a chocolate fountain, surrounded by bread cubes, marshmallows, strawberries--

Dad-dee! Read me...!

After her bath The Adventures of Curious George, her favorite, her damp head leaning into his shoulder, smelling sweetly of strawberry. With wet fingers he turned pages, voice sonorous, somnolent, until at last she drooped, breathed rhythmically, peacefully. He carried her to bed and kissed her face--

"Brandon says they're some douchebag sales types here from some conference..."

Errol nodded, pretended to hear.

Another man came over. "Hey, beautiful," he said.

"Okay, let's get out of here."

"Yes." Errol finished his drink.

Harper stopped in the doorway. "Actually, no, first I should break his jaw--"

Errol pulled on her arm, as the men cheered. He steered her outside. They walked a distance, and finally stopped on a bench under palm trees. Colored lights jittered over the pavement. A lilac fragrance. The moon slicing into Lyra.

Harper shook her head, digging into her small purse.

"Don't tell Genie..."

She lit a cigarette.

"You want one?"

Errol took the offered cigarette. It tasted sharp, sweetish. They faced the ocean, silent, smoking. Around her head a halo of blue twisted into integrals, sigmas. How long had it been since he smoked? Since college, at least. It felt good to be different. Be strange. His arm snaked along the bench, behind her back.

"Oh, God."

Harper looked down at her phone, smoke streaming out the side of her mouth.

"What?"

"My boyfriend."

"Oh, what... is he...?"

Errol coughed violently. Lungs an inferno.

"You okay? Here..." She slapped his back.

Nearly falling off the bench, he waved, nodded, eyes watering.

"Been a while. I'm...! Coff! Coff!"

She typed at her phone. "Sorry, I know this is rude. I hate it when other people do this to me. But he's such an asshole sometimes."

Errol rubbed out his cigarette. His heart felt as if it had been squirted with Bactine. His breathing calmed by degrees.

"Okay. There." She put away her phone. "I didn't bring him for a reason. He can't take the hint. But... ugh... it's really my fault. He was cheating on me a few months ago, like, *big* time. And he got this chick pregnant. Unbelievable. He paid for her abortion. It was so... But I took him back. Just so dumb. I think there's something wrong with me." She abruptly looked at Errol. "Oh, shit. Sorry. What inane stuff, huh. Compared to..."

"Compared?"

"To your... to what you...?"

"Oh! No, please. I'm sorry about your... I mean..."

Harper coughed a laugh. "Were you going to say boyfriend?"

"No. I mean... Never mind. I should probably shut up."

Light applause rustled from the palms.

Harper finished her cigarette. After a silence, she said, "Do you... No, stupid question."

"What?"

"Do you miss your daughter?"

Errol pursed his lips. He scratched his cheek.

Tell her.

"Yes. Yes, I do. Of course."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"No, please. I'm just... It's hard to talk about."

"Right. Sorry."

"But thank you. I... really like you."

Harper stood suddenly, unsteady. Errol smiled at her. He offered his arm, and they went back to the hotel. The reception was still going on, but most everyone was gone. The bride and groom had driven off in their decorated Hummer.

"Well!" Harper said. "I see they had a fine time without us."

"Yes."

They went to the elevators. She was staying on the floor below his. They rode up in silence. 7... 8... Getting out of the car, she looked around at him. Waved her fingers.

Piggly wiggly.

"Good night!"

Ask her up to your room. Do it!

"Good night," he blurted just as the doors shut.

The next day he was supposed to meet everyone for breakfast. But the thought of possibly seeing Harper tightened the knot in his stomach. Head pounding, he had to think very hard about what he had done, or not done. What an idiot he was. But she had smiled and waved. Those Farrah teeth! Yes, she had smiled at him.

He took a cab to the airport and purchased an early flight. Five hours later he was back in his apartment.

His phone had twenty messages. Frantic ones from Mother and Lorne. They were concerned. It was a shitty thing to do, to run away like that. He knew it. His heart thumped irregularly, judgmentally. Utter silence save for the ringing in his ear, the tiny faint hum of the eternal, infernal insect.

He sat at his desk. Inert.

Again he saw Harper. Her smile. The crazy man with the chocolate face. The bartender with the scissors tattoo. The cigarette. Her tongue darting at the flask. Harper. Lyra... He should have said something. Something like: *Music's in the air whenever you are here*. Big chance, and he flubbed it.

He looked around his apartment. What a sad dump. Could she even fit in it, she was so big? She loomed huge in his thoughts, a celestial goddess. Her golden head would scrape the popcorn ceiling.

Suddenly feeling light and hopeful, he started to clean. Yes, he'd see her again. It was time... He vacuumed, dusted, wiped down counters, straightened papers. He went through closets.

In a shoebox was a photo of Delaney.

A fifth grade photo, her last. She wore a striped red-and-white blouse with a ladybug barrette in her hair. Head tilted slightly. That smile. Hot emotion gathered in his chest as he gazed at the photo.

"I miss my baby," he said aloud.

That did it: saying it aloud. He shouldn't have done that. The photo shook.

I miss my girl. I miss my little girl.

An immense pain rose from his guts. It blasted out with a prolonged wail. He cried, howled, rocking, tears raining off his face. He sank to the floor, sucking air, sobs squeezed and torn from him like broken notes, the photo held to his chest.

"I miss you, honey! I miss you...!"

The photo was pressed to his heaving chest. *My little girl.* He cried, quieting and then starting up again. *My little girl.* He didn't want to let it go.

7

That evening, feeling hollow and broken, he made his calls. He apologized to Mother and Lorne, telling them he'd not been feeling well and that he needed to go home. Their silence, during both phone calls, implied they assumed it was about Delaney. Errol let them make the assumption.

He went back to cleaning and, as if merely another object to tidy away, returned the photo to the shoebox, shutting the lid.

Then he called Lorne back.

"Hey, there's someone else I should apologize to. I don't know if you have it, or if Eugenia has Harper's number...?"

With a faint note of surprise and wonder in his voice, Lorne recited the digits. It was getting late. But California was an hour earlier. It would be okay, wouldn't it? He glanced at his Trumpet calculations, as if for an answer. Or permission.

Stupid, he thought.

"Hey, Harper? It's Errol."

"Oh! I heard you left."

"I did, actually. I'm back in Denver. But..." The knot tightened. "I wanted to apologize for leaving so abruptly, I guess."

Harper laughed hoarsely. "Why are you sorry?"

"Well, no, actually I wanted to thank you. Thanks, I mean, for hanging out with me. It was nice. It was really nice."

"Sure, it was no problem."

Silence.

"Anyway..."

"Hey," Harper said. "We're all going to the beach tomorrow. Just another after-wedding party with some of the girls. Why don't you come?"

"Come out? You mean... Oh, but I'd have to fly back. Wouldn't that be ridiculous?"

"Okay. Right."

"Yeah. It seems ridiculous. It is, isn't it?"

There was another silence. "I don't know," Harper said. "Aren't these things usually ridiculous?"

That morning he was on a flight back to California. As he contemplated the scattered clouds on the horizon like fiery notes, he smiled. *Ridiculous*. Yes, he thought. The perfect word.