

## Extinguish

The sky was full of stars.

They'd parked somewhere just off the old highway leading out of town, a clearing where the Miller gas station used to be before the elder Miller died and they tore it down. Not much survived here once the new highway was built, and what did manage to survive, only barely, shut down at five. Once the sun went down, life drained out of this stretch of the old highway and headed north toward the gleaming Hardees that had been recently re-done and the brand new Bed, Bath and Beyond. They even shut the street lights off, after Nolan Miller got drunk one night and took a pole down with his Tercel. *It would cost too much to fix it*, the first selectman said, *we ain't lighting a street nobody drives on*. Unencumbered by people and the fluorescent glow of low-level capitalism, this clearing was a perfect spot to park and watch the sky.

Charlie came here all the time. He'd lay flat in the bed of his pickup, his jacket curled up under his head like a pillow, and stare up at the stars. He liked the way the weight of the sky felt on his chest, its expansive blackness pressing down on him from all sides, but reassuring and familiar. The sky had seen everything -- hell, the sky was everything -- and its billion-years memory contained survival after survival. The universe had been through some shit, and knowing that made dropping out of college and still living at home seem small and inconsequential. *I can learn something from you*, Charlie often thought. *You are so much bigger than I will ever be*. Sometimes he'd get drunk, each empty beer bottle pushing aside just a bit more the voice of his father telling him what a fuckup he was, how he was wasting his potential, how he was such a disappointment compared to his brother, bottle after bottle, putting as much space between Charlie and the shit he failed to do as there was between Charlie and the stars.

Other times he'd just lay there, staring up, finding constellations, wondering what it'd be like to be anywhere but here.

Tonight was the first time Becca came along. They'd been dating for a year, and when Charlie asked her what she wanted to do for their anniversary, she said, *Show me where you go when you wanna be alone*. So instead of driving down to Wheeling for dinner at this French place he found on Yelp, Charlie pressure-washed the bed of his pickup, inflated the air mattress his mom kept in the spare bedroom, threw together some blankets and a meat and cheese tray he bought at Shop 'n Save, and drove Becca out to the old highway clearing.

"It's quiet," she said, almost surprised.

"You can sit here for hours, and never see a car go by."

"You sit here for *hours*?" More interest, than judgement. Charlie decided to tell her the truth.

"Yeah," he said. "Sometimes."

"Then thank you for bringing me," she said. "I don't know much about the stars."

Charlie's charm roared to life. He dug his left hand under her shoulders and pulled her close, then stretched his right hand up toward the sky. He might not know much about keeping a job or not flunking out of school, but he knew about stars, about the sky. He showed Becca how to find constellations -- the three stars in a line that help you find Orion, the four stars that make the box that help you find the Big Dipper. He'd walk her through each constellation, pointing into the sky, drawing outlines in the air, holding her hand up and tracing them with her, then watching her trace them all on her own. When she'd master a constellation, she'd laugh -- a bright, twinkling laugh that made him feel warm -- and she'd ask for another.

"We're not even looking at now, you know," he said, after she'd expertly traced Andromeda.

“What do you mean?” she said.

He puffed up a little, certain the next thing would impress her. “Stars are so far away from us, we’re not even looking at now. The light from those stars can take millions of years to get here, some of them. We’re looking up and seeing millions of years ago.”

Becca’s smile widened, and she turned back toward the sky, seeing it differently.

“Cool” she said, still staring up.

Charlie turned his head to look at her. Becca’s lips were slightly parted, on the brink of words. He was glad the moon was full. The bluish-grey light outlined her face just enough so it stood out against the darkness. Looking at Becca was the opposite of looking at the sky. In the soft curve of her cheek, the way her nose listed slightly to the right, the gentle wave of her honey-blond hair, he felt he was looking at the future. She was pretty, and she was *here*, and Charlie wanted to kiss her, to move on top of her...

“They’re *bright*,” she said, drawing out the word as though bright was something stars shouldn’t be. *Of course they’re bright*, Charlie wanted to say, *you got no road signs or street lights or headlights out here. They’re the only light in the sky.*

“Yup,” he said. He kept the rest to himself.

“No, I mean, look at ‘em,” she said. “They’re, like, *weird* bright.”

Charlie dropped his brow a little, frustrated. *We should be making out*, he thought, and he adjusted himself to look back at the stars.

They were brighter.

“See?” Becca said. “Weird bright.”

The stars usually sat in the darkness like delicate pinpricks, a quality Charlie admired since they were really giant flaming balls of gas, but now there was nothing delicate about their presence in the sky. They’d all seemed to grow slightly in size - *something impossible*, Charlie

thought to himself -- losing their gentleness and gaining a kind of insistence that was unsettling. The color was different, too. The mostly-uniform white of before had given way to yellows and reds and the angry purples of leaves changing in autumn. Charlie had never seen the sky look like this. *It looks angry*, he thought.

He turned back to Becca, and saw in the moonlight her face had changed. Her mouth was tightened, her brow furrowed down, and her right hand extended into air in front of her.

“Where’s three?” she said.

Charlie looked up to where she was pointing. She was pointing to the place in the sky where Orion sat. Something looked off. He scanned the constellation finding every star in its place, except one.

The third star of Orion’s belt was gone.

“What the fuck --” Charlie muttered. And a second blinked out. Becca must have been watching it, too, because the moment it was gone, she let out a little gasp. Charlie held his breath, eyes intently focused on the last remaining star in the belt. *Don’t disappear don’t disappear don’t disappear don’t disappear don’t -*

And it was gone.

Charlie sprang up, and scooted out of the pickup. *Stars don’t disappear*, he thought. But suddenly they were. Charlie stood in the clearing and watched as more of Orion blinked out of existence. Behind him, he could hear Becca’s voice. “Charlie?” Small, trying not to draw the attention of whatever was erasing the universe.

At first, he thought it was just his eyes re-adjusting to the darkness after leaping out of the pickup, but once he’d watched a few more stars go dark, he realized what was seeing was real. Against the darkness of the night sky, there was something darker -- a shape, shifting, growing, moving across the black. It was somehow blacker than black, this shape, this *thing*,

and where it moved, stars disappeared. Where stars disappeared, it filled the space. He couldn't figure out the mechanics of it -- how close is it? How big is it? Is it like the stars and a piece of past? -- but it was there, a bleeding out of whatever the universe is made of.

"What is it?" Becca was now standing right beside him. When did she leave the truck? Charlie hadn't heard her.

"I don't know," he said.

"Charlie, I wanna go."

Half the stars in the sky were gone. The ones that were left began to burn an orange-red. Becca grabbed Charlie's arm and tugged it. "Let's go." He didn't move. The black thing kept growing, and one side of it was reaching out -- not quite an arm, but an organized extension -- toward the moon.

Charlie had created a list of explanations in his head: *There was a fire a few towns over and this was just smoke, covering up the sky. It was clouds, weird clouds, some kind of weather that hadn't made it on the news, freak storm or something. Dust from construction somewhere. Something else we aren't seeing or figuring out. It's not just gonna eat the moon.*

When the edge of the black thing hit the silver-bright round of the moon, it looked like sparks. Becca screamed, and pulled hard on Charlie's arm. He brushed her off, eyes fixed upward. *It took a bite*, he thought. And that's what it looked like, a bite out of a cookie, crumbs of rock floating around the bitten-off edge. The black thing kept moving, and the moon kept disappearing, piece by piece.

Before the black thing took its last bite of the moon, Charlie remembered the first time he drove out to the clearing on the old highway where the Miller gas station used to be. He'd just broken up with his girlfriend Kari, three girlfriends before Becca, and he'd just gotten fired from his job at Walmart. He dad had been an asshole, erupting into a profanity-rich tirade about

“being fucking responsible” and “carrying your fucking dead weight,” ending with his mother in tears and a bottle of bourbon smashed against the kitchen sink. He got out of the house before his dad could take his keys and before the suffocating size of his failure could swallow him whole. He didn’t know where he was going. He just drove, blaring the radio loud enough to hurt just a little, screaming into the night all the things he wished he’d said to his father in the kitchen. He pulled off at the clearing on a whim. He needed to cool down. He needed to yell into the darkness some more. When he was done, he stretched out in the bed of his pickup, his jacket curled up under his head like a pillow, and looked at the sky until the anger was gone.

The moon was full that night. And the only thing other than Becca that ever made him happy was the clearing, the pickup truck, and the sky.

“Charlie!” Becca’s voice pulled him out of his memories. The stars were gone. The moon was gone. Everything above was the blacker-than-black of the thing he didn’t understand in the sky. “Look!”

Charlie turned. Becca was standing in the middle of the road now, staring down the old highway, back towards town. You could usually see the glow of the Hardees and the Bed, Bath and Beyond from there, but tonight, now, there was nothing. Only black.

Only blacker-than-black.

The thing from the sky was moving down the old highway, bubbling over itself, spreading between trees, consuming whatever space it touched. Just like the moon, when its edges met the world, sparks flew and the world it touched crumbled away into dust and debris. Charlie ran to Becca, and grabbed her hand.

“We gotta go, Becca. Come on,” he said.

“Why?” She was calm. She pointed down the highway in the opposite direction. Charlie turned.

More of the black thing. More of the world disappearing.

They stood there, not moving. Without the moonlight, it was harder to see the curves and lines of Becca's face, but Charlie squinted, trying to see them, making out what he could in what was left of light. The thing got closer, and began to hum, a low, gurgling hum like a machine under water. He wondered if the rest of the world was already gone, if this thing had saved him and Becca for last, erasing all the places he should have gone and all the people he should have treated better, before coming for him, finishing him off.

"I'm glad you showed me the stars."

Before he could answer, the black thing met the small of Becca's back. She arched her chest forward in pain, mouth open. The blacker-than-black lifted her gently off the ground, just a few inches, suspending her so that she hung in there in space. *Like the stars*, Charlie thought. There was no scream, because the black thing pushed through the back of her skull and out through her mouth, like a tongue of inky smoke that began to wrap around the rest of her, slithering and clinging to the outline of her frame. Her eyes widened and cracked in half, opening like jaws turned sideways in her sockets, pouring out more of the black thing. Becca began to break apart, cracks on her skin veining out from her eyes, like rivers on a map, coursing down onto her neck, her arms, her legs. As they'd appear, they'd widen, opening up space between where Becca was and where she wasn't anymore, burning her away, atom by atom, crumbling her into a dust that rose upward and spread out into space until there was nothing left.

The hum was now a roar. The black thing was upon him. He extended his right hand, in the manner of a handshake. *You are so much bigger than I will ever be*, Charlie thought, his eyes clenched shut. *I hope this does hurt*.

Then, nothing. Silence. The universe was still.

Charlie opened his eyes.

He was standing in the middle of the old highway leading out of town, in front of the clearing where the Miller gas station used to be before the elder Miller died and they tore it down. He was alone. In the distance, he could see the glow of the Hardees and the new Bed, Bath and Beyond, right where they should be, where they weren't before.

He looked up at the sky, and it was filled with stars.

"Charlie?" Becca's voice was gentle in the air behind him. He turned to see her, sitting up in the bed of his pickup. "You okay?"

Sometimes Charlie wondered if the people who left the towns they were born in felt different, in their bones, from the ones who never left. He wondered if moving through the world left marks, and if it did, were the marks like maps, did they tell you where you were in the world, so you didn't have to wonder, so you didn't have to guess, so you'd know if anything had ever happened to you at all.

"Hey." Becca's voice was closer. She'd scooted from the truck bed and walked over to Charlie. He turned to look at her.

Her face was her face, but not quite. It was the same with the truck, with the trees, with the lines on the old highway, with the glow of the town, with the stars in the sky. The same, but not quite. Something left a mark.

Charlie smiled and closed in the space between them. He brushed a piece of Becca's hair behind her ear so he could really look at her.

Her eyes were the soft blue they'd always been. He decided it was only the moonlight that made their centers look blacker than black.