

A Faith in the Stars

I still remember the pieces of salt and pepper hair falling out of Granny's loose bun as she reminded me that we're all part of God's plan. Her hands were extra shaky that day and her teeth seemed to show even more coffee stains than usual. I sat there pretending to listen, and she knew I didn't buy any of it. She knew I grew up believing the words of Carl Sagan and Neil deGrasse Tyson. The phrase "We are stardust" has decorated the inner side of my left arm in calligraphy since I was 16. So in the contest of faith versus science, she and I were often on opposite sides.

I glance at the ink on my arm just as an ember from the campfire zaps the part of my ankle that peeks out below my jeans and jars me back to reality. Sophie's still going on about her feelings for Zach. Maria's listening intently and it looks like Paulina is too. To my left, Katya toys with the rim of her orange sock. She's gotten a lot of compliments on them but they look like the color of carrot purée to me. To my right, Kim's slyly snacking on a pack of almonds hidden under her baggy sweatshirt sleeve, but from my angle I can see a corner of the packaging sticking out.

"I just don't understand what he thinks Amber has that I don't." Sophie grovels and crosses her arms, "She's like 12 anyway."

I'm not trying to be cold; I just don't see what her complaining is going to do. It's not like Zach is going to hear her talking, waltz out of the trees, and plant one on her right now just because she's made it evident that she's desperately in love with him at least three times.

Besides, she's not the only one who's been desperate for a love she couldn't have.

“Amber isn’t even that great at Judo, so I don’t see why he’d notice her for that,” Maria tries to add a valuable comment to the conversation but the others just nod politely and jump back to their own points.

The cords of Leonard Cohen’s *Hallelujah* come into the background off of Kim’s iPod, and the conversation stops. At first I freeze- goose bumps- and then I shuffle my feet and take a breath.

“Kim,” it’s a hushed whisper from Paulina, the only audible one among many. They all mean the same thing: something along the lines of “turn off the song” with an “oh my god” subliminally thrown in there somewhere.

Now I’m thinking of the hushed whisper she spoke as she found me on the concrete step, not marble like the floor inside- or so I’ve been told. “Hallelujah,” the word came from an older woman I now call Granny, or used to. In her arms she cradled a newborn baby wrapped in that cliché pink blanket.

“It’s okay,” I say, forcing a smile. “Let it play.”

My friends all know this was her favorite song. I remember hearing her voice crack a bit as she’d sing it to me before bed. Soon after she died, a few weeks ago, life became pretty bland. Having adopted me after my birth mother left me on a hospital doorstep, my Granny was kind of all I had.

“Oh my god Kim did you steal the almonds?” Katya’s pointing at a deer-in-headlights version of Kim who uselessly shakes her head. The girls burst into laughter, little particles of almonds flying out of Kim’s mouth, Paulina holding her stomach in dramatic affect. I let a genuine, but small, laugh escape.

We had come to look at the stars, Sophie, Maria, Paulina, Katya, Kim, and I. We're Freshmen Astronomy majors at University of Washington and we consider ourselves "Space Chasers," meaning we take lots of camping trips in the hopes of seeing some rare space phenomenon. I usually like hanging with the girls and I usually like these trips, but ever since Granny's been gone the way I saw the world seems to be consistently shift. I wouldn't say I've been depressed, but I can't focus on any details anymore, and yet I also seem to find a new innate awareness of them.

Now a song by Ed Sheeran comes on in the background off of Kim's iPod, and suddenly the campfire turns into a chorus. I look around, not singing along but slowly taking it in- their ability to find joy in the trivial.

I used to think my Granny's love would be as evergreen as the love in the lyrics of this song.

Perhaps she was onto something though, back when she used to lecture me about God's plan and stuff. What if she felt she undoubtedly knew this was true, and she wanted me to believe it too because she didn't want me to feel lost in the vast thing called Space?

I once had an Astronomy professor go off slightly briefer than Sophie about the significance of Space and the insignificance of humans- our obsessions, our wars, our accomplishments, maybe even our deaths. It was after the Presidential Election in 2016, and the professor was trying to make a statement that all were welcome in his classroom. And while he did quite that, he also added a layer of profundity by explaining how his love for Astronomy budded out of the fact that space makes all the petty battles and disagreements seem minute in comparison.

“Because despite whatever any politician says, you are another small speck of dust on this planet. You might find that intimidating, being a speck on an already miniscule dot, but I find it reassuring. I find it uplifting,” Walter talked with his hands and he moved us with his words. He was three minutes over the end of class but even the slackers stayed in their seats. “To think that despite everything that goes on in the world, ‘our’ world, we’re all just apart of the same single grain of sand in the greater universe, if that. So what does where we come from on that grain of sand even matter? Why does any of it matter?”

In my head I was screaming the whole time, refraining from jumping out of my seat as the words flashed in the forefront of my mind, bouncing off my skull, “Carl Sagan Carl Sagan Carl Sagan! We are stardust! Star-stuff!”

Carl Sagan once made the statement, “We are made of star-stuff.” And National Geographic has since confirmed, along with Neil deGrasse Tyson, that our bodies are made of the same things as the stars. Maybe that’s why I’ve admired them for so long- they’re the only concrete pointers I’ve ever had as to where I came from.

Another ember strikes my ankle and I flinch but I’m in too deep. I’m thinking about my family, my family of creatures we call ‘humans’ made of stars. Ask Carl. Ask Neil. Perhaps I’ve always had more faith, not just in science, but also in space than in any sort of God. But maybe Granny didn’t want me to feel alone when she left. Maybe she wanted me to have something deeper to hold onto so I don’t just get washed up in the merciless vacuum of time and space that Walter described. Or maybe she just really liked going to church.

“Dee, you good?” My head snaps up at the sound of my name.

I nod, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You’ve just been really quiet,” Paulina digs.

“I’m just thinking a lot about Granny,” I admit it. But no one knows what to say so they all just sit there staring at me from across the blaze. I wonder if any of them have seen a single star.