

Caitlin Conroy

Leonid

A star is born when space particles come together and form a single mass. The gravity from the immeasurable amount of hydrogen and helium atoms slowly draws them together. As a result of the density, the hydrogen atoms bond to create helium, releasing energy that will last billions of years. It has the potential to light up galaxies and sustain life.

I'm seven. It's November in the middle of the night, and I'm fast asleep in the top bunk until Mom nudges me awake. Drowsily looking down at her gentle face, I try to figure out what she's planning with no success. She stretches up to greet me as I lean over the railing.

"Come down and get your shoes on," she murmurs in my ear. "I want to show you something." It won't occur to me to question my parents for another three years, so I obediently clamber down, my feet carefully balanced on each rung. My sister is still curled up under her pastel baby blanket as I slip past her.

Then I'm in the minivan in nothing but my pajamas and shoes, and Mom's at the wheel. The streets are completely empty, save for the streetlights that cast an eerie orange glow. We go to a soccer field, the one next to the playground on top of a landfill. Mom takes two comforters from the back of the car and spreads

one out on the ground. She slowly eases herself down and tells me to join her. I'm worried because my shoes are covered in dew and grass clippings, and I know I'm not supposed to get that stuff on blankets and carpets. But once I'm snuggled in the crook of her arm under the other comforter, I'm too content to think about it.

Mom tells me to look up at the sky, and I do just that. Right in front of me is this endless void, littered with stars that seem so small, they remind me of the glitter on our craft room floor. I had learned at school that we are tiny specks on a minuscule rock surrounded by gigantic bodies of pure energy. In the moment, I consider this to be both wholly impossible and irrefutable fact.

"We're going to see a meteor shower. You know what that is?" Mom asks. I shake my head, so she continues, "It's when some rocks in space, or meteors, come down to Earth and burn up in the sky. So we'll be seeing a lot of shooting stars."

I perk up at the thought of shooting stars; I'd never seen one of those before. I keep glancing at each star, half-expecting one of them to just drop from their place. There's one that's bigger than the rest, and my eyes keep wandering back to it. It looks ripe, as much as any star can, ready to drop.

Then there's a thin, white streak in my peripheral. By the time I jerk my head over to see it better, it vanishes. "Did you see that?" Mom asks.

I nod and add, "It's hard to tell which one's going to fall."

Mom chuckles, her soft body rising and falling next to me. "You can't. Don't focus on one or two, just look at the whole sky."

It's a struggle, but I try. Slowly, the occasional meteor shoots by and makes a clean slice in the fabric of space. I make a little "Oh!" in amazement every time, even when seeing the same thing over and over

again starts to get boring to my little brain.

The movement slows down eventually, and the cold finally seeps through to our bones, so we pack up to head home. Back in the gentle warmth of our living room, I curl up on the couch and watch early-morning television. Mom mentions that she's calling me in sick for school. At some point I ask about the big star, and she replies that I probably just saw a planet.

I'll spend over a decade looking at the stars. I won't become a scientific-minded person like my sister, not even close, but the stars and all of outer space will always be in the back of my mind, ready to spring forth to the forefront at the right moment.

A star dies when it runs out of hydrogen to turn into helium. In a desperate bid to continue generating energy, it expands to over 100 times its original size. When the sun dies, either the resulting red giant will engulf the Earth or our atmosphere will be superheated until all of our water evaporates. No matter what, the very thing that created life on Earth will destroy it.

I'm eleven, at this astronomy workshop for Girl Scouts. Mom's with me, of course—she's involved in everything I do, especially as my troop leader. We're the only two from our area, so I nervously hover around her while the other girls pair off. I've never been able to socialize with people my age, and tonight really reminds me of how lonely that can be.

Still, it's fun learning about the stars and planets in a universe that is so incomprehensibly vast. When the sun sets, we all fumble in the dark for our charts and the instructor loudly tells us about the constellations with an authoritative finger up towards the sky. I try to look where she's pointing, try to translate my sheet of connect-the-dots into stars. But the sky is one big smattering of lights. I could only ever find the Big Dipper, the simplest, most obvious constellation, and I won't find anything else.

During the drive home, Mom and I talk about the workshop and other things we'll forget about in ten years. Mom lets me pick the music, so I tune the radio onto some pop channel that only plays the same ten songs. One of them is about this boy who just can't make his parents happy no matter how hard he tries. He sings about how they used to be close, but their relationship has fallen apart beyond repair.

I think about how close my mom and I are at this moment, how we spend almost every day together. Things aren't perfect but they're pretty close, and in this car I realize that someday I'm going to lose my mom. Maybe I'll be sixteen and alienated from her, maybe I'll be fifty and at her deathbed, but Mom won't always be there. Suddenly I'm crying, mourning a life I haven't even lost yet, and Mom doesn't notice even though I'm right beside her because I'm being swallowed by the darkness.

In a couple months, my father will announce that he and Mom are getting divorced, and that he will be moving away shortly. Mom will take on a part-time job to make sure we don't lose the house and give up working with the Girl Scouts. I won't have much time to go star-gazing because between the massive amount of homework from middle and high school and being shuttled between two homes, I will be busy enough.

A red giant must eventually die, as well. It sheds each of its outer layers until only the core, a white dwarf, remains. Although they are small--sometimes the size of Earth--and not very bright, they are dense, and are some of the hottest objects in the universe.

I'm twenty and I'm standing alone in front of my school's University Center. I probably shouldn't be here, since it's the middle of the night and we all know what happens to girls my age that are alone at this hour, but I've made an insignificantly precious discovery.

If I stand in just the right spot in front of the building, between the overhanging lamps and

streetlights, I can see the stars in the sky.

Normally the entire campus is completely lit up. It looks like we're all trapped under this dark tent, and I'm lucky to see Jupiter or a stray airplane. Even now, I can only see a tiny handful of pinprick lights. Not for the first time, I feel an odd swell of homesickness for my dark little hometown.

I should probably go. I bet I look ridiculous. But I want to see—there it is. The Big Dipper. It looks so weak, so faint, but it's there. Chances are that nobody else cares about a bunch of tiny sparks in the sky, but to me they are priceless. Proud of my little accomplishment, I briskly head inside to escape the oncoming chill and possible on-campus dangers.

Next year, The Powers That Be on campus will continue their LED movement, and only a handful of lamps will keep their old-fashioned glow. The ones in front of the University Center won't be part of that handful, and the new, blindingly bright lights will wash out the stars.

A star well and truly dies when, as a white dwarf, it cools off to the same temperature as its surrounding open space. Since it produces neither energy nor light, it is difficult to detect. A ghost of the universe, it quietly passes through with no hint to its former glory.

I'm twenty-one, back home for my last free summer. It's July and Mom's going on about two things tonight: a surprise meteor shower we've *got* to see and a screwdriver I've *got* to try. I've decided to put off both of those until two in the morning, the meteor shower because it didn't start until then, and the screwdriver because I knew I'd need something to warm me up a bit.

At one-thirty Mom gets up and starts gathering blankets. I made a beeline for the kitchen to pour together some vodka and orange juice with a dash of sugar. Gulping it down, I try my best not to taste too much of the alcohol's harsh bite, instead focusing on the warmth that spreads through my gut.

Outside, I'm freezing despite the sweatshirt, comforter, and drink. It doesn't help that the chair I'm sitting in is steel, sending a sharp chill down my spine. We're on the back porch of the house. Between the streetlights in the back alley, the tree next to us, and the full moon, my view is pretty limited. After half an hour with no sightings, I'm starting to get annoyed, especially since this was supposed to be this rare, see-a-shooting-star-once-a-minute spectacular event.

"I'm waiting another forty-five minutes, and then I'm going inside," I mutter.

"Be patient," Mom replies.

I wrap myself more tightly in the soft, down-filled blanket. By pure luck, I glance up just to see a tiny streak of light in the sky.

"You see that?" Mom asks excitedly.

"Yep."

We watch some more, but after an hour and only four meteors, we're both starting to lose interest.

"Screw this, I announce, standing up and bundling the blanket.

We'll quietly file inside. Mom will go online to see if anyone else has seen anything and confirm this showers was a bust. We'll spend a few minutes laughing at the sarcastic comments on NASA's home page, then go straight to the comfort of our beds.

In August, there will be another meteor shower, but the clouds will be too thick and we'll be too busy for it.

However, black dwarfs are entirely theoretical. This is because the process of a white dwarf cooling off to become a black dwarf takes more time than the universe has existed. In fact, even if ready-made white dwarfs burst forth from the Big Bang itself, they still wouldn't have cooled off today.

I am twenty-two. It's been three months since I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree, and one month since I started my first full-time job. Making my first unsteady steps into true adulthood, I'm trying to piece together a budget that allows me to find a place of my own. Before that, I need to find a better job-- after I save the money to buy a car that will last longer than a few years.

Growing up and being independent used to seem so quick and easy, but now it feels like I'm barely crawling towards this abstract idea of a functional life. Fortunately, Mom takes me in, letting me stay with her while I turn that idea into a reality.

Right now, I'm leaving a wedding on a farm. I barely know the bride, a second cousin I rarely saw after my father married my stepmother and bonded with his in-laws, so I slip out unnoticed. Frankly, I'm perfectly fine with that. Weddings remind me of my own family ripped apart by divorce and remarriage, and how alone I feel without someone I could picture marrying. Plus, Mom's precise instructions to only have two drinks a certain amount of time before I drive back were too much of a pain to remember, so I just abstained altogether.

Walking through the cornfield to the parking area, I get sick of feeling my heels sink into the soft soil. I slip my shoes off and grin at the sensation of wet, thick grass between my toes. I scurry off, further away from the security of the party lights, with an almost childlike glee.

Surrounded by total darkness, I happen to glance up. Overhead, the stars are unhindered by common city lights and spray themselves out across the sky in the cosmic whorls they are supposed to have. Suddenly, the stuffy wedding, the drunk guests, and even the suffocating summer humidity cease to matter. There are only the stars above me and the ground beneath.

I will leave when I see the other guests going to their cars, too. After an hour-long drive, I'll be

welcomed home by a lit front porch and a warm hug. I'll spend an hour gossiping about estranged relatives, then go to bed feeling much more at ease.

Someday, a star will die. For now, though, it will continue to evolve and shine.