

PINHOLES
IN
BLACK
MUSLIN

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from
Cold to the Touch

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Stewart looked up at the night sky, at the single northern star around which everything rotated. Whenever he felt uncomfortable, Polaris was the one place to which he knew he could always turn, the one constant in his life.

But to stargaze was not why he had travelled four hours northward from Toronto. Philip had dragged him along on a weekend getaway. Stewart had initially resisted, not because he did not know Philip well, but because he had long ago realised that though he had lost many friends over the course of his life he had done little to gain any. Perhaps, he thought, it would do him some good to be in the company of people rather than stars. Perhaps he might learn to forge new bonds and replace those that had long since broken.

He sat around the campfire while the others talked and laughed, and wondered how he could infiltrate their connection. It was as though there was a thick wall protecting them from him, but in that wall there was a tiny hole between the bricks, just large enough to see through and observe the warm life existing beyond. Even the sound of the loons on Lake Tyson, and the crickets in the grass around him, seemed distant, as though they too were beyond that great barrier.

‘Aren’t you going to eat something?’ Philip asked, and Stewart looked at the fire and the others surrounding it. No one else was turned his way, yet he could feel them watching, deciding what to make of him.

‘I guess so,’ he said, and picked up the long skewer he’d been issued and went to the cooler. Inside, a package of meat floated on a sea of ice and water, beer cans bobbing around it.

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‘Hey! Pass me one of those,’ Daniel said, and his windbreaker rustled as he held out his hand. Stewart reached into the frigid water and retrieved the can for Philip’s friend. ‘Thanks . . . Stewart, right?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘So, Stewart, how do you know Phil again?’

‘We work together. At the bookstore.’

‘He works in the Science department,’ Philip added. ‘It’s the section right next to mine.’

‘Oh yeah? Wow. I failed science class, myself.’

Stewart put on a smile and nodded. He had no idea how to respond. Should he ask what Daniel did for a living now? Was that the right thing to say?

Before he decided, Daniel was speaking to his sister again. About what, Stewart had no idea, so he returned to his seat and fed the sausage for which he had no desire into the flames.

It was hard for him, having an interest in something no one knew much about, and being so disinterested in anything else. It made small talk difficult for him. He didn’t understand the mechanics of it. Philip made it look easy, which might have been the reason he and Stewart had formed any sort of connection—Philip did all the work. It was a marvel sometimes to behold him, speaking to the bookstore customers as though they each were important to him, listening to their stories with what appeared to be genuine interest. Stewart’s own rare attempts felt stilted and awkward, and he worried his face betrayed his disingenuousness. How much easier the stars were, with their predictability and their silence. That far up north, he had seen lights he had never seen before—not past the blinding glow of the city—and he wished he could have spent time there alone with only his telescope and astral charts.

It was interesting, though, in a way, to be there with others, when the rest of civilization was so far away. If he thought about it, he could almost imagine they were the last life of earth, just six people on an empty planet. He wondered what would happen if he were to indeed pretend that. Would he then find it easier to

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interact with them? To befriend them? He had to do something, because as it stood he had nothing left in his life but the sky.

'You're pretty quiet,' said Claire, Daniel's sister. Stewart had trouble looking at her. 'What are you staring at?'

He stammered. 'The constellations. I'm trying to find Cygnus. I can't usually see it when I'm in Toronto.'

The whole group looked up.

'Which one is it?'

'It's that cluster of stars, obviously,' Trevor said, and Stewart tried to modulate his voice to keep it sounding friendly.

'Actually, that's not it. It's the one that looks like a giant cross.' He looked at Trevor for a reaction. The man said nothing, but looked bored by the answer. His girlfriend though, did not. Annie looked fascinated, an effect intensified by her blonde curls being lit so brightly by the fire.

'I'm amazed we can see it,' she said. 'There's so much pollution in the air it's a wonder the sky isn't permanently covered with smog.'

'That's why we have a hole in the ozone layer.' Trevor smirked at his own joke.

'Actually, there isn't really a hole,' Stewart said, but even as he spoke he wished he hadn't. No one could possibly care about what he had to say. 'The layer is thinning, but not completely gone yet.'

'Yet?' asked Philip.

'Give it time,' Claire said. 'Pretty soon, there's going to be nothing left alive on this planet.'

'Who needs ozone anyway?' Trevor's laugh was interrupted by Annie's punch.

'It protects us from the universe, you jerk!'

For the first time that night, Stewart's smile was genuine.

Still, as the evening wore on, he didn't find making friends of the people any easier. They were so unlike him, so gregarious and full of life, and as they progressively became drunker, he felt increasingly alone.

Stewart heard the fire hiss as it began to burn out, and the breeze he had barely noticed before became suddenly chilling.

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Annie wrapped Trevor's arm around her and squealed. Stewart caught Claire's eyes roll.

'We should get inside,' Trevor said. Somewhere over the lake there was the distant sound of thunder. A loon cried once in the darkness beyond them, and then went silent.

Trevor's cottage appeared smaller once the lights were turned on, its two bedrooms squeezed together along the western wall.

'Are you sure you and Stewart don't mind sleeping out here on the couches?' Annie asked. Philip waved his hand.

'I've slept in plenty of worse places, with plenty of worse people.'

Stewart could think of nothing to add.

'We'll switch tomorrow,' Claire said. 'Dan and I can sleep out here and you two can get the beds. Stewart shouldn't be forced to stay on the couch *both* nights.' She looked at him as she spoke, and he was keenly aware of how warm his face had become.

After everyone turned in, Stewart lay awake in the darkness. The windows were open, their curtains pushed aside, and he could see the tiny points of light that made up the Milky Way. There was no noise but that hiss he had earlier thought had come from the fire. He wondered what animal made that noise, and why it was the only animal he could hear.

He was unsure if or when he had fallen asleep under the blanket of darkness, but he awoke at some point in the night with the strange sensation of being watched, as though eyes he could not see were surrounding him. He tried to convince himself it was not true, but he could not dismiss it. Then, he heard the floorboards creak. He sat up, his throat so dry he could barely speak in a whisper.

'Who's there?'

There were more footsteps, now less cautious. Stewart shrank before he was seen.

'It's Trevor,' a voice whispered back, but in the darkness Stewart could not be sure whose it was. 'Who's that? Philip?'

'No. It's Stewart.' He wondered if the name would mean anything.

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‘Sorry, buddy. Did I wake you?’

‘No,’ he lied, then struggled for what to say next. ‘I don’t sleep very well outside my own bed.’

‘Yeah, that whistling is keeping me up, too.’ What whistling? Stewart thought. ‘I’m going down to the lake, in case anyone else wakes up.’

‘Okay, I guess.’

There was a heavy sigh, though Stewart could not be sure if it came from Trevor or the sleeping Philip, and a moment later there was the sound of the door opening. A faint rectangle of stars appeared in the nothingness. Then, Trevor’s body filled the hole, and the room fell dark once again.

When Stewart next awoke there was light, but it came from a clouded sky, and he could not tell for a moment just how early or late it was. His face felt swollen, his eyes sticky, and for the briefest moment the anxiety of being so far from home was intense.

Philip was still asleep on the other side of the room, and the doors to both bedrooms were closed. Stewart recalled his encounter with Trevor in the darkness, and wondered if it had been a dream of his sleep-deprived mind—there was no way to be sure. He checked his watch. It was just past ten.

He always hated the morning, hated knowing the stars were out there, up in the sky, but too hidden to see. In his apartment in Toronto, he would have spent the night looking at those heavenly bodies, tracking their course on his map, then sleeping-in the next day. At the cottage, he could not keep that schedule—he had to follow that of the others, and as a consequence he found himself with nothing to do but listen to the others sleeping.

It all felt eerily still. The sounds that should have been so clear during the day were muted, as though everything but he were submerged beneath the murky water of Lake Tyson, and all he could hear were its waves lapping the shore. He shuddered in the stillness, and felt its oppressing weight. Perhaps everyone’s dreams were seeping into the air, accumulating to form clouds overhead that erased the stars from the sky.

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The first of the others to wake was Daniel, but the sound of him opening his bedroom door roused Philip as well. The former appeared no different than he had the night before. Philip, however, looked as though he'd been beaten by his dreams, and his face looked as Stewart felt.

'What time is it?' he asked, the last word becoming the beginning of his yawn.

'It's half past ten.'

'Christ! I wanted to get out on the lake before it got too warm. Do you think we should wake the others?'

'No, let them sleep,' Daniel said. 'Trevor will get angry if we interrupt him.'

'Um—I think he's already gone.'

'Gone where?'

Stewart shrugged.

'Probably for a swim,' Daniel said. 'That's all he could talk about on the way here. Should we go down, boys? We can leave a note for the girls to join us when they wake up.'

'Sounds good.'

The three men walked down the tree-covered hill toward the lake. It looked much different in the daytime, and Stewart could scarcely believe it was the same lake they had spent hours beside the night before. The remnants of the campfire were still there, right where he remembered, but everything else seemed wrong. The lake was rougher, and there was an electrical smell in the air like that after a thunderstorm. Wind was shaking the trees, and he thought for a moment he could hear the whistling Trevor had mentioned in the night.

'It's quiet this morning,' Philip said. 'And cloudy. I can't even see where the sun is.'

Stewart looked up and Philip was right. Not having anything in the sky extended the sense of being trapped in a timeless limbo. Daniel, though, seemed to be adapting.

'You can still feel the heat,' he said. 'Do you guys see Trevor anywhere?'

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Stewart looked but saw nothing on the empty beach except the canoe that was tied-down between two trees, just beyond the fire-pit. From somewhere above there came a strange hum, like an engine running far away, though its intensity wavered. At times it was so faint he wasn't sure he was still hearing it and not just the memory of it.

'I don't even see any footprints,' Daniel said. 'Stewart, was it still raining when Trevor left?'

'Um . . .' he stalled, trying to remember the night before, but every second it took increased his nervousness, until he couldn't speak words at all. Philip intervened.

'Look at the ripples in the sand.' He pointed. 'What does that?'

'I don't know,' Stewart said, and he did not. There was only so much he knew about the earth sciences, and even then only how it related to astronomy. What he *did* know was the patterns in the sand had left him uneasy for a reason he could not fathom. He watched the sand creep across the beach under strong gusts of wind. It made the water roar, yet behind it that same hiss, that same whistling, continued, though now loud enough he was *sure* it was there.

'Can you guys hear that?'

Philip looked back quizzically, but Daniel seemed too distracted.

'I'm sure Trevor's just taking a walk. Last time we were up here, he spent half a day walking around in the woods. Right now, I'm more worried about getting that boat in the water. I don't know how much longer the weather is going to hold out, boys. Stewart, you want to go on the water, right?'

'Okay. Sure.' Should he have said more?

'That's the spirit, I suppose.' Daniel chuckled. 'Philip, help me flip the canoe over. It looks like some sand got into it during the storm.' Philip grabbed the other end while Stewart watched, and the two shook the small boat. Sand fell out, and was blown across the beach.

The canoe did not appear large enough to hold three people at once, but Stewart said nothing. He could only assume Daniel and

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Philip knew what they were doing, as he understood virtually nothing of the world of camping and cottage living. So many others he encountered spoke that outdoors language though, and it was not the first time he felt excluded by his ignorance.

Perhaps he could learn it, if he tried harder to understand.

‘Do we . . . um . . . don’t we need oars or something?’

‘Actually, we need paddles. Oars get locked into the side of a boat.’ Philip made circular motions with his hands, mimicking rowing. ‘But you’re right. Where are the paddles?’

‘They can’t be far.’ He started kicking the sand around where he stood. ‘Maybe they’re buried? Split up, boys, and help me look.’

The three walked away from each other, Daniel into the trees behind, Philip and Stewart on the sand. It didn’t take long for them to find something.

‘Stewart, come here and look at this,’ Philip said.

He was standing over a dark shape, about ten feet or so from the water. Stewart approached.

‘What is it?’

‘I think it’s a towel.’

It looked like it had been in the water for ages. It was covered in dark dead algae, and its balled shape suggested it was wrapped around something small, about the size of a cantaloupe. He could not bear the thought of touching it to see what was inside.

‘It must have washed up on shore.’

‘But it’s so far from the water.’

‘Hey, I found them!’ Daniel’s voice carried from the trees. Philip looked at Stewart with a moment of concern, then forced a smile and clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Let’s go!’

He ran to Daniel while Stewart rubbed his bruised shoulder. Somewhere above there was a wide field of stars hidden behind the blanket of clouds.

Philip and Daniel came across the sand, canoe held above their heads. They looked excited, and Stewart couldn’t help but feel infected by it.

‘You’ll love this, Stewart. Last time we were up here, I wanted to spend the whole day on this thing. Okay, ready Phil? We’ll flip

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it on three.’ He counted off the numbers, and then they flipped the canoe over and placed it on the edge of the water. ‘Okay, we’ll push it out and then—’

Someone behind them was shouting. Stewart could barely hear it over the waves in the lake. The three of them waited and listened. The shout came again. He saw a shadow move among the trees at the top of the hill. Stewart squinted, but could not tell who it was.

‘Hang on, boys. I’ll be back in a second.’

‘If you’re not back in five, I’m taking him out without you.’

Daniel smiled broadly, then turned and trotted off, stumbling up the hill and into the trees. Philip watched him go, and then turned back to Stewart with a worried look on his face.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Hm? Oh, nothing. Help me carry this boat out. We aren’t *really* going to wait for him.’

They each took a side and waded into the lake. It was colder than Stewart had expected, and murkier. He supposed he was used to the water from the municipal taps.

‘Okay, put it down. Now, get in while I hold it.’ Stewart climbed in awkwardly. When he did, water shot up in a small jet from the bottom of the craft.

‘Damn it!’ Philip said, and Stewart looked down at the water streaming in through the tiny hole, filling the otherwise empty boat. ‘Come on, we aren’t going anywhere. Let’s carry this thing back and go see where the hell everyone is.’

Stewart got out cautiously and the two of them carried the boat back to where they’d found it. Philip tied it down again, and then they began to walk back up the hill towards the cottage.

‘I wonder if Trevor’s back, yet,’ Philip said as they climbed.

Stewart said nothing.

At the top of the hill, Daniel and Claire stood talking. They both turned, and then looked disappointed when Stewart and Philip emerged from the trees. It hurt to see, especially from Claire. Then, she spoke, and Stewart did not know what to feel.

‘Annie’s gone.’

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‘She and Trevor probably went off somewhere,’ Daniel said, rolling his eyes. ‘You know what they’re like.’

‘I wonder how we missed Trevor,’ Philip said. ‘How did he get past us?’

‘I didn’t see him, either,’ she said. ‘Annie was still in bed when I left to take a shower. When I got back, she was gone.’

Daniel did not seem concerned. ‘I’ve been telling her; I’m sure they’re going to show up later, all full of smiles.’

Something about it did not seem right, but Stewart couldn’t put his finger on what was wrong. Perhaps it was the lingering smell of ozone in the air, or maybe the feel of the sand underfoot though they were so far from the beach. Or, was it that damned noise? The sound of wind rushing past? Surely *it* was the cause of all the strange things he’d heard.

‘Let’s go inside. It looks like it’s going to rain any minute. Trevor and Annie can take care of themselves.’

But Stewart didn’t join them. Instead, he sat on the deck of the cottage for the next few hours beneath a sky that grew murkier with each moment and watched the trees for sign of Trevor and Annie. He could hear the other three inside as they spoke, though the words seemed distant. Even the sound of the wildlife had diminished, and he wondered why he could not hear any birds with so many trees around him. Any indication of the world beyond the cottage had gone, leaving an oppressive cloud-filled void in its wake. But he could see a break in that cover, a small hole in the sky through which light shone. That had to be some kind of hope, didn’t it? Something to indicate things were going to be okay? Even the rushing sound of the wind picking up could not take that from him.

Claire’s sudden appearance at his side startled him. He felt clumsy, and fought his body’s urge to flee.

‘What are you looking at?’

‘Oh, um, the sky, I suppose. Just at the clouds.’

She looked up and he saw for a moment the spot where her long neck touched her chest.

‘Phil tells me you’re into astrology.’

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'Astronomy,' he said, and she laughed.

'That bugger. I *knew* he was lying to me.'

Stewart smiled as well, and struggled for words, but she did the work for him.

'Do you think there are other people up there? Like us?'

'You mean like aliens?'

'I suppose so,' she shrugged.

'No. Not really.'

'Why?'

He took a breath and held it while he considered lying to her.

'In order for life to have formed on earth, there first had to be hundreds of millions of protein molecules shaped the right way.

Do you follow me so far?'

She nodded.

'Given the size of Earth, though, do you know how long it would take for a *single* one of these to appear? Roughly, ten to the two hundred and forty-third power billions of years. Not only is that older than Earth, it's older than the whole universe. The odds of it happening *twice* are too astronomical for me to imagine.'

'So, you think we're alone?'

Stewart hesitated.

'Go on. You can tell me.'

'I think there's nothing out there but cold darkness. Nothing but an endless vacuum, and it's only by a freak chance we're alive to know it.'

'Do you think it's jealous of us?'

Words caught in Stewart's mouth. Claire laughed again and touched his arm. 'It's okay. I'm messing with you!'

Philip and Daniel emerged then, wondering what the laughter was about. Claire just looked at Stewart and smiled. 'He just told me a joke.'

Stewart felt strange inside, as though a wall were crumbling.

'Well, maybe he can tell us later. Right now, I'm getting worried about Trevor and Annie.'

'I still think they're okay,' Daniel said. Philip shot him a look. 'Well, I *do*,' he murmured.

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‘They’ve been gone too long, and that sky isn’t getting any better.’

‘There’s a hole,’ Stewart said, but when he looked up it was gone.

‘Do you really think something’s happened?’ Claire asked.

‘I think we should go look for them.’

‘But we don’t know where they went.’

‘We’ll find them. I don’t want to wait until it’s too dark to see. When it’s no longer safe.’

The wind had cooled in the last few moments, and Stewart rubbed his arms. Then, he was outside himself, watching as he stood there on the deck of a summer cottage, surrounded by people who were joking with him, preparing to step off on a walk through trees and beaches. How far he was from the bookstore, from his field-guides and telescope. He felt a million miles away from his regular life, and he could almost hear it spiralling away. He wanted to reach out, but did not know if he wanted to catch it or push it away.

‘I think maybe we should go now,’ Stewart said, ignoring his doubts. Then, stronger, ‘We should go now.’

‘You boys are wasting your time.’

Claire put her hand on her brother’s shoulder. ‘Don’t be long,’ she said, and Stewart tried to smile.

The two men made their way down to the beach, then up again through the trees surrounding the cottage, yet they found no sign of Trevor or Annie. It was as though the couple had lifted both feet from the ground and vanished. Neither Stewart nor Philip spoke much as they walked, the sound of the forest preparing for the storm making it difficult to be heard. The animals *must* have known it was coming, for at no point did Stewart see a single hint of wildlife. It was as though they had all gone, and what was left was less a forest and more the *representation* of a forest—as though he and Philip were walking through one of the displays he saw so often in the department store windows along Queen Street on his way to work.

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The wind returned with strength beyond anything Stewart had ever experienced, moving through the trees and throwing branches up into the air. The two of them stopped as grains of sand flew like tiny missiles into their faces, and Stewart closed his eyes to protect them. The sound the wind made was terrible—like a scream that would never end. Stewart’s heart raced with the noise, and then he reached out for Philip to assure himself that he too would not disappear.

When the wind died down, Stewart slowly opened his eyes. Philip was rubbing his own, and looking ahead in the near dark.

‘We should turn back,’ he said, though it was clear he did not want to do so. ‘It’s six o’clock, but it looks more like eleven.’

‘Maybe Trevor and Annie made it back.’

‘Maybe,’ Philip said.

The two men made their way back through the woods, moving quickly to avoid the rain they were sure was coming. Through the canopy, Stewart could see the hole in the clouds had reformed, and beyond it a star shone brightly. For a moment, he thought it was Polaris, but its position in the sky was wrong. He looked down when he realised Philip had stopped. He was pointing, and at first Stewart saw nothing.

Then, something up ahead moved.

Was it Trevor or Annie? he wondered. Just before Philip called out, Stewart knew it was neither.

‘Claire? What are you doing out here?’

‘I don’t know,’ she stammered, visibly upset. She looked as though she were about to fall, and Philip ran to hold her up. Stewart was ashamed of his own inability to act. ‘I was inside, and then I thought I heard you two coming back. I went outside to check on you, and then there was this sandstorm or something. I think it cut my face,’ she said, and Stewart could see the tiny drops of blood that had formed there, like a lattice of wounds. ‘I couldn’t move—I could barely breathe. Then, I went back inside—’

Claire burst into tears, and the sound filled Stewart with dread. He did not want to hear the rest.

‘I went inside and he was gone. Daniel was gone!’

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Philip held her, and tried to reassure her with calm words, but as she continued to sob he turned and looked at Stewart with confused terror. Stewart did not doubt he looked the same.

The cottage door was open when they returned. Stepping inside, the first thing Stewart noticed was the sand—the floor was covered with it, as were the counters and the furniture. The windows were wide open, and the sheer drapes hanging before them waved wildly. Philip closed each in turn, excluding all but the loudest howls of the heavy winds. Claire's sobbing had lessened, and Stewart led her to the couch while Philip checked each bedroom. When he returned, he looked at Stewart and silently shook his head. 'Don't worry, Claire. I'm sure he's just gone looking for the others.'

She sniffled. 'What's going on? Where *is* everybody?'

'I don't know.'

No one spoke. The only sound was of the outside world spinning around them. The air felt heavy, weighing down as though they were under water. Stewart went to the window and looked at the dark world. The sky was filled with clouds, and they all seemed to swirl around that tiny patch of empty sky in which hung that tiny light. Was it Sirius, perhaps? Could he somehow be mistaken about where it should be? The trees below swayed wildly, their dark shadows like dancers against the night, trying to call down some ancient god.

Then, the unearthly howl returned and grew louder, as though a dam had broken, and something large and vast was rushing towards them. The walls of the cottage shook, and the windows rattled as though they were about to break. Then something rained down upon the roof, striking so hard Stewart thought it would break apart. He put his arms around Claire, as did Philip, trying to protect each other from whatever was trying to get in. The storm continued to push at the windows and at the door, but somehow the small cottage stayed standing, and eventually the wind and sand that had raged like a river eased. Claire slowly lifted her tear-swollen face and looked at Stewart.

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‘I want to go home,’ she said. He would have kissed her if he were not so afraid.

‘But the others—’

‘The others aren’t coming back,’ Philip stood, and brushed the sand off his clothes. ‘We can’t stay. We need to go before it’s too late.’

There were no arguments. They packed their belongings quickly, doing their best to ignore the whistling howl as it built again in the background.

Philip led them out of the house and toward his car parked a few metres away, while Stewart watched the horizon closely, hoping for some warning. The wind coursed around him, and he could feel its pull, but he held tight to Claire, sheltering her under his arm. When they reached the car, Stewart froze in disbelief. The car was buried to its doors in a drift of sand, like some relic from the past.

‘Come on!’ Philip said, and was kneeling, digging the drift away with his hands. He worked with a crazed frenzy, and when she saw him, Claire joined in the effort. Stewart continued to watch the sky, watch the dark clouds swirling overhead around that one empty space that framed the universe beyond. He had to squint to keep the sand and the wind from blinding him, but the stars he saw there bore no resemblance to anything he knew.

‘Okay! Let’s go!’ Stewart barely heard Philip’s words over the din, but the car door was open, its interior light insignificant in the dark of the storm. Philip and Claire were already inside, and Stewart got in. When the door closed, the pressure in his head eased somewhat.

‘We’ll come back in the morning. Maybe the others will be back at the cottage by then.’ Philip did not sound confident, but Stewart and Claire nodded, and Stewart tried to convince himself he agreed.

Philip turned the ignition key and the engine revved to life, but only for a brief instant before it sputtered out. He turned the key again and there was the awful screech of metal against metal. ‘What’s wrong?’ Claire said, an hysterical edge on her voice.

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Stewart and Philip looked at each other, and then Philip silently pulled a release beneath his dashboard and stepped out of the car. The wind blew his hair wild as he lifted the hood, and Stewart watched Philip's ten fingers appear over the top of the metal slab. Then they flexed. Philip disappeared behind the hood as Stewart looked at the strange cloud coming towards them. Then, Philip slammed the hood back into place and climbed back inside the car. For a moment, all he did was stare at that same cloud.

Then he turned.

'The engine has seized. It's full of sand.'

The three of them sat quietly; wind pushed against the car. Outside, there was a sound so deep Stewart was not sure at first it was there, but he felt the vibrations in his chest. The entire car rattled.

'What are we going to do?' Claire asked.

Before he could answer, the air became denser, as though under a great pressure, and through the window Stewart saw the tree branches pulled upward. Sand moved wildly through the air and pounded into the glass of the car windows. In the darkness, the debris looked like a hand with too many fingers, long tendrils waving. They closed around Philip's car, and then the vehicle started to rock back and forth in its grip.

'It's going to roll us over,' Philip said. 'We have to get back inside the cottage!'

'It's too far!' Claire screamed, her hands pressed against the sides of the car to keep from falling.

'We can't stay here,' he said. 'We can't stay here!'

Stewart tried to open his door but the wind pressed it shut. He kicked it repeatedly until it opened, and the wailing sound filled his head. Claire reached her hands out and Stewart and Philip yanked her free just before the door slammed shut with a crunch and the entire vehicle buckled as though squeezed. Philip screamed something Stewart could not hear, and then the three of them ran towards the cottage without looking back at what chased at their heels.

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They were inside the cottage in seconds, its door closed and Philip and Stewart's weight pressed against it. The noise was behind them, racing towards the door. The walls of the cottage shook worse than before—the door shaking until splinters fell, the glass beginning to crack in the panes. Stewart was sure this time it would all break apart around him. He closed his eyes tight, and did not open them until Philip said the words Stewart feared most: 'Where's Claire?'

Philip slowly slid up until his face was at the small window in the door, and then Stewart followed. Through the broken glass and into the windstorm, he saw Claire struggling, being dragged by unseen forces. Then, she fell backwards and was yanked into the dense shadows of the towering trees. The air filled with debris rising into the sky.

'She's gone towards the lake!'

Why, Stewart thought, does everyone keep leaving?

'We have to go help her!'

Stewart opened the door and it flung inward, smashing into his knee. He crumpled, but the gale did not stop. By the time Stewart could move, Philip was gone, racing towards the trees and the beach beyond.

'Wait!' Stewart called out, and then started to give limped chase after the last of his friends.

The blasts of wind and the airborne debris made it hard to see, but Stewart continued toward the spot from which he had seen Claire disappear, following as close behind Philip as he could manage. The dark clouds overhead spun faster and faster, all being drawn into the small hole in the sky. He could feel the pull even from the ground, that sense of lightness to his step as though he weighed less the further he went. The pull was almost unbearable, and as long streams of sand crossed in front of him like clenching fingers, he recoiled, allowing Philip to travel further into the darkness. Then, as Stewart watched horrified, Philip was lifted off the ground as though he were nothing.

At first, he did not seem to notice; his legs continued working, trying to push him faster and further. Then, he began to tumble,

Cold To The Touch

and realised something was wrong. Stewart tried to run to him, but the swirling winds prevented anything more than a few steps, and by then Philip was far out of reach. He began to spin in the air, as though caught in a funnel, and he circled faster and faster in ever tightening circles, moving towards the one bright spot in the sky. Over the roar of the storm, Stewart heard something, but did not know if it was Philip screaming, or something far worse.

There followed a cracking noise, deep and thunderous, and one by one he saw the trees along the ground ripped free of their roots, pulled upward by an impossible force. Beyond that, from the lake, a giant funnel of water rose into the sky and it too circled the small opening in the clouds. Stewart turned away, unable to watch what was happening, and ran. He ran as fast as he could, but even as he did so, he could feel the cold hunger of the universe behind him, peering through the hole it had made in the barriers protecting the world. It was insatiable, wanting its fill of life, though Stewart understood it would not be enough. It would *never* be enough to fill the vast emptiness. He ran as hard as he could, driven by the knowledge that if he stopped it would be the last thing he ever did. He ran despite the pain that shot through his knee with each step. He ran until his breath tasted of blood, and his body was screaming for relief. He ran until his knee cried out for him to stop, and then until it decided to stop on its own, throwing him forward.

But he never hit the ground. Instead, he ascended slowly towards the stars to meet his friends once again.