

“Selfishness must always be forgiven you know, because there is no hope of a cure”

1940

“The sun and the moon and the stars,” she said when, at five years old, her parents asked her what she wanted for Christmas. When she unwrapped a rocking horse, she burst into tears. The next year, they bought her a telescope.

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1957

She became the first woman to obtain a PhD in astrophysics from her university the same year the dog Laika became the first animal to orbit the Earth.

On the day she graduated, her thesis advisor knelt before her, presented her with a ring and the statement, “Will you marry me?”

She raised an eyebrow and asked, “I want the universe and you give me a lump of carbon?”

Because he didn’t know any better, he laughed and said, “You don’t ask for much, do you?” When she didn’t smile back, he took her hand in his and spoke gravely, “I’ll give it all to you, my dear: the sun, the moon, and the stars.”

She had her doubts, but he knew a lot about gravitational attraction and had access to a rather large telescope, so she agreed.

She knew that once she got married it would be hard to get a job, but she didn’t realise it would be impossible. She sent out CV after CV but didn’t get a single interview.

“Don’t worry,” said her husband. “We can continue working together; you have such a keen eye for detail. Who needs an official position?”

Together they continued the work she started as a PhD student, staying up late into the nights developing mathematical models to describe how galaxies may have been formed by the collapse of giant clouds of small particles. They worked side by side, but when their papers were published, she was not listed as an author.

“Where’s my name?” she asked, her eyes flashing.

“I couldn’t possibly have credited you,” he said; “you don’t have an academic affiliation.”

She searched for words to say, but found none.

“But what does it matter?” he said, slipping an arm around her waist. “We’re a unit, right? Aren’t you happy?” She immediately ran to the bathroom and threw up.

He was relieved when, a few weeks later, they discovered she was pregnant. “This will give you something to focus on,” he said, “something of your own.”

When the baby came, she looked into its eyes and, at first, she imagined she saw stars. But then, there were many other things she began to see as well: endless things like feedings, nappies, laundry, exhaustion. She tried to keep up with research when the baby slept, but whenever she settled down to read the latest academic papers, she invariably fell asleep.

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1961

Another baby followed, and then another. Her mind was full of little things: menu planning, weaning, homework, toilet training, the logistics of organising transport to school, shops, after-school activities, play-dates. Occasionally she’d type up her husband’s work or typeset some of his equations, but her brain was too fuzzy, too frazzled to digest the concepts, to follow arguments. Although she loved her children, she often forgot to smile.

She was at the supermarket when she saw the headlines about Yuri Gagarin. She picked up the newspaper and was so absorbed by the article that she didn’t notice her youngest child playing with a jar of jam until it fell from his hands and shattered on the ground. When she got home, she couldn’t stop crying, and she was still crying when, later that evening, her husband returned from the department.

“You’ve got a loving family,” he said, “Beautiful children, a nice house. I give you everything. I respect you. What more do you want?”

“I want what I’ve always wanted,” she said. “I want the universe.”

“Is that all?” he said, his voice dark with sarcasm. “Well, what about me? Have you ever thought about what I want?”

Her eyes went cold and hard. “You? What do you want?”

“A wife,” he said, not taking his gaze from hers.

“Then why,” she said in a slow, measured tone, “did you marry a scientist?” For a moment, they regarded each other. Then, she turned away and lowered her voice still more. “I wonder which of us is guilty of the greater greed.”

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1969

The day Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, her husband brought home a newspaper, waved it in her face. “One small step for man,” he crowed, “one giant leap for mankind!” He danced gleefully around their living room, couldn’t understand why she wasn’t dancing with him.

“What’s the matter,” he said, “are you jealous because someone claimed the moon before you did?”

She looked at him coldly, arms folded in front of her apron. “Just because you stick a flagpole in something doesn’t mean you own it,” she said.

Not long after, the affairs began: his with one of the department secretaries, hers with a Newtonian reflector that she bought when she found out. “It’s cheaper than a divorce,” she told him when the bill arrived.

After that, they took turns going out in the evenings.

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1971

“It’s over,” he said on the day the Soviets launched the first manned space station and it took her a moment to realise that he was talking about his secretary, not the Space Race.

“What happened?” she asked, wiping her hands on a dishcloth.

“We,” he began and she noted something humble, something yearning in his voice. “We had nothing to talk about. She has no interest in astronomy.”

“Pity,” she said coldly. “You would have had it all.”

“I wouldn’t have you,” he said. “I wouldn’t have your mind.”

She flung the dishcloth on the counter and whirled to face him. “What mind?” she demanded. “When do I ever use my mind?”

“We can do better,” he said and held out his hands to her. “I can do better.”

“What are you trying to say?” she asked, hands in fists on her hips.

He paused for a long moment. “They hired a new lecturer in the department,” he said. “A woman.”

She felt a chill wash over her, then a wave of heat, but she said nothing. She watched him looking at her. His brow was furrowed and the muscles around his mouth were tight.

“She’s young,” he continued, “fresh out of her first post-doc. She’s clever enough, but she’s nothing like you were. Like you are.”

“Is she married?”

He paused again, then sighed. “She says she isn’t. That seems to be enough for the Dean.”

“So that’s how it’s done these days,” she said, turning back to the sink.

“I miss working with you,” he said.

“I miss working,” she said.

He put a hand on her shoulder. “I brought home some notes you might like to read.”

“The dishes,” she said.

“I’ll finish them,” he said.

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1976

While her children were at school and her husband was in the department, she read papers, worked on her equations. After she put her children to bed, she and her husband sat at the kitchen table and compared notes. When she had computationally-heavy problems to solve, her husband applied for time on the department’s mainframe.

Her first son graduated on the day the first photos and soil samples were taken from the surface of Mars. She sat in the audience and was proud, but as the endless string of names were read out, she wondered where her own name had gone.

In the autumn, her husband’s department hired her as an adjunct to teach a handful of first-year courses. She was interested in research, not teaching, but the university affiliation made it easier for her to be listed as first author on her papers. When she published, she used her maiden name.

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1986

They watched the Challenger blow up on their television. Over and over, replay after replay, it disintegrated before their eyes.

She looked at the picture of Sharon Christa McAuliffe and felt the lines on her own face. “That could have been me,” she said.

“That could have been us,” he replied, and took her hand.

“It nearly was,” she said.

“I promised you the sun, the moon and the stars,” he said. “I thought I could pluck them out of the sky and put them in your hands. But the universe was just too big for me to deliver.”

“I was born too soon,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, “I think you were.”

She stood up and walked to the window. Outside, the sky was clear and the stars were twinkling.

“I still want it all,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “I know.”

Late into the evening, they watched the stars appear and disappear at the edges of their window, traversing their invisible paths through the cosmos.