

Kelly Morris
Cat's Eye

The first time I set eyes on the Hubble Space Telescope images of the Cat's Eye Nebula, I decided that there was nothing more beautiful in the universe than a dying star. I found the picture in a *National Geographic* magazine that someone left next to the dumpster behind the apartment I lived in with my father. When I showed the picture to Gina in the lunch room at school later that day, she laughed. Gina was my best friend, so she was allowed. It amused her that I—who had never been any good at math or science and who had lived my entire life among city lights that obliterated the night—would have even a remote interest in such a thing. But there it was: a bursting cloud of beauty in the coldest, darkest depths of space. It made me feel small and insignificant, but also lucky. For a minute, staring at the glossy page, I felt like the luckiest person on Earth.

These feelings were helped by the fact that the farther away something was from me, the more attractive it became. My life at sixteen was not an experience I would later look back upon with nostalgia. My mother was long gone, I didn't know where. She left when I was two. My father was a drunk who was fucking Mrs. Pola, the school counselor, a woman who liked to tell my teachers that I had self-esteem issues, which caused me to engage in self-injury. What she thought she was protecting by saying that, I don't know. I took up skateboarding and joined the soccer team so I could tell people at school that my bruises came from sport.

Gina was the only one who knew the truth, though not because I told her. She just knew. And even though she laughed at me in the lunch room that day, it didn't stop her from buying me a telescope and a book about constellations for my birthday. The telescope was cheap, but it worked. The book was from a second-hand bookstore, well used and with faded pages, but I treasured it like a holy book.

We began sneaking out late at night, a ritual repeated whenever the weather was benevolent enough to give us a clear sky. Gina would tap

lightly on my window and I would raise it and climb over the ledge. Then we would ride on her bike, me balanced on the handle bars as she pedaled through the suburbs, until we hit country roads that took us far enough from the city that we could at least see the brightest of the stars. In the summer, we brought a blanket to throw on the grass, and bug spray to keep the mosquitoes away. In the winter, we brought a thermos of hot chocolate that we passed back and forth with gloved hands.

We joked about the possibilities of alien life. I fantasized that they would be benign and friendly, that they'd show up with bouquets of otherworldly flowers. Gina had less faith in the universe. She figured they would be more like people.

"What makes you think they wouldn't just kill us and put us on a specimen board?" she said.

She had a point. There was no reason to think they'd comprehend kindness. But I liked the idea of flowers.

The night my father caught us, it ended. It was midwinter. Gina and I had waited thirteen days for the clouds to break and give us a view of the night sky. I was halfway out the window when my father burst through the door and yanked my arm so hard I felt the muscles in my shoulder tear. He smashed the telescope against the wall. When I tried to stop him, he knocked me to the floor. As always, once he had me down, there was nothing to do but wait, eyes closed, until he got tired, or bored, or decided he'd done enough. Later, when I was alone in my room, I crept to the window and looked outside. Gina was gone. I don't know what I expected. For her to stay, maybe. But perhaps that was too much to expect from even the best of friends.

After my father went to sleep that night, I dragged a duffel bag out of my closet and packed it as full as I could. I put the constellation book—the one thing my father hadn't managed to destroy—on my person, tucked safely in my coat pocket so that when I zipped up the front, I could feel the corners of the book digging into my side. On my way out of the house, I grabbed my father's wallet. I took out the cash and put it in my jeans pocket. When I got to the Market Street Bridge downtown, I dropped the wallet, containing his driver's license and credit cards, into the river.

I had gone two miles along the shoulder of the highway when someone stopped to pick me up. I didn't even have to put my thumb out. The car slowed and pulled over in front of me and waited. I approached and opened the door. A woman, older than me, maybe in her thirties, sat behind the wheel. A news broadcast hummed on the radio.

"Where you going?" she asked. She had a bit of a Southern drawl. Not a local.

"As far as you're willing to take me," I said.

She nodded and gestured for me to get in. I threw my bag in the back and climbed into the front seat. My face felt hot. The bruises would be

showing by now. She didn't ask any more questions, just turned the heat up and the radio down. The highway was empty, except for us. The lumpy shadows of the trees that lined the road slipped past, in the margins of my vision, like thunderclouds pushed by the wind. I fell asleep with my hand over the book in my pocket, wondering what my mother took with her when she left.