

## do i follow the star? (or the gypsy king?)

When Ben is young, he maps out the constellations on his bedroom wall. Small, nimble fingers, smudged with charcoal. Off-white wall, decorated with stars and planets, constellations bursting outward and stretching toward the window that hangs on the far side of the wall. Wide, longing sweeps of arcs and ellipses: galaxies blooming. Polaris is a diamond; Ben flexes out the corners of it, presses the charcoal harder than he did the others, so it stands out against the rest.

He maps out the night sky when the stars are bright and congregated, winking at him, like sunlight filtering through pindrop holes in a canvas of onyx.

\*

It begins like so: the school spends three weeks covering the solar system.

The teacher fills up the green chalkboard with white powdery strokes — rings of Saturn, idle craters on Moon's surface, panned-out drawings of vast and unending corners of the Milky Way galaxy. Students in their seats, feet resting on metal bars in desk underbellies. Pencils against paper, furiously scratching, eager to copy down and move onward.

Ben stares at the blur of green and white, camouflage of kaleidoscope worlds. One hand flat against a spotless sheet of paper, the other loosely gripping a pencil.

"Benjamin?" the teacher says. "The final is next tomorrow — you may want to take notes. They'll help you prepare."

Snickers. Quiet whispers. Ben's eyes regain focus, his hand tightens around the pencil. "Yes, ma'am," he says. Taking notes makes his eyes leave the chalkboard, and some small sliver of magic is lost.

\*

Ben stays after class. Students stuff their backpacks at the sound of the bell, and the squeak of desk chairs against linoleum is almost as loud as the chatter and laughter that flow out the doorway. He touches his fingertips to a nearby desk and watches the toe of his shoe trace the edges of a tile square. He doesn't want to speak first: this is the teacher's schoolroom, not his own.

He hears the rustling of papers, a cushioned chair deflated by a sinking body, and then a pause. "Benjamin? What can I do for you?"

"I was just wondering..." He looks up at the chalkboard. Wisps of galaxy tendrils curling around celestial beings. Moon's phases, arcing over everything. Pluto as small as his pinky fingernail, and as bright as the sun. "Could you keep this up?" he asks. "Until tomorrow?"

The teacher swivels her chair toward the board, chin resting on her palm. She glances at him thoughtfully. "The solar system drawing?"

"Yes," Ben says. "I know you'll have to erase it before the test, but I sort of — I want to take a picture of it."

She watches him.

"It's really nice," he explains.

She smiles. "Alright," she says. "I suppose that'll be fine. I'll leave a note in the corner of the board, and hopefully the workman will notice it."

He watches as she writes, *Please do not erase. Thank you!*, in the upper-righthand corner. She turns back to him and says, "How's that?"

"Oh, that's great," he says. "Thanks!"

"Of course," she says. "I'll see you tomorrow. And study up," she adds, stern words with a soft smile.

He smiles back, slings his backpack over his shoulder, and leaves the schoolroom.

\*

Horace is lounging on the porch of his house as Ben climbs the grassy hill. A sweating glass of soda-pop with ice rests on the railing, darkening the wood beneath it. Wind plays with the collar of his worn denim jacket. His face stretches into a grin as he sees Ben come nearer. He pushes the bridge of his glasses over the curve of his nose, and stands up, and steps off the porch, and bends down to gather Ben in a hug, all warm mass and jumbling arms.

"Hey, Ben," Horace says by Ben's ear. He pats his back, and pulls away from the hug, but stays crouching down, stays with Ben's eye level. "How have you been, my man? It feels like forever since I've seen you." He touches his thumb to the line of Ben's jaw, the protrusion of his Adam's apple. "Look at you, all growing up." His grin is wide and contagious. "I'll bet you're getting all the little ladies."

Ben adjusts his own glasses with awkward fingers. "Not quite," he says, and Horace laughs a little. "I'm not really that cool, in case you haven't noticed."

"Give it time," Horace says, clasping Ben's shoulder assuringly. "Everything gets better with time."

Ben nods.

Horace stands up to full-height, his knees cracking, and he leans back against the porch railing. "Were you just coming over to give me a visit — and it's about time, I'm not taking 'school keeps me too busy' as an excuse any more, mister," and he musses Ben's hair with the tips of his fingers, "or was there something you need from me?"

"I was wondering if I could borrow something from you," Ben answers. "I only need it for a day, I can bring it back to you tomorrow after school."

Horace says, "Sure," with a nod, and hops up the steps, across the porch, gesturing for Ben to follow. He does.

Horace's house is bright and cool, drapes hooked back so setting sunlight seeps in, and a handful of fans pointing every which way and circulating air at the highest rate. Horace is in the kitchen, at the refrigerator, holding the door open. "Want some iced tea? Lemonade? Water?" He pours himself a glass of lemonade and glances at Ben over his glasses.

"No, thanks," Ben says.

Horace puts the lemonade away and takes a sip from his glass. He smiles and shakes his head at Ben. "You sure are a man on a mission," he observes. "Not even my best batch of lemonade can distract you."

Ben smiles shyly.

Horace takes another sip, then tips his head toward Ben, with serious intent. "What is it I can get for you?" he asks.

"Do you think I could borrow your Polaroid camera?" Ben asks.

"What for?" Horace asks.

Ben answers thoughtfully, "To take pictures of the universe."

Horace smiles at Ben, this wonder of a boy, this aged soul in a young body, and then says, kindly, "Of course you can, Ben."

\*

The camera is heavy. Ben carries it around his neck, the cloth strap black and thick against his

nape. Sweat collects there, hot and slick: the kind that makes his fingers slip against the nape of his neck when he readjusts the strap. The camera is bulky and comprised of corners, and it hangs low on his body, swinging from side to side with each step that he takes, jangling against his stomach, ricocheting off one hip to land on the other.

A packet of blank polaroid photos is in the pocket of his khakis, unopened. One hand carefully cradles the bottom of the camera. The other hand presses to his pocket, thumb slipping inside to feel the plastic wrapping, the paper-thin jagged edge. Empty rectangular slices ready to be filled with color.

\*

His house is empty when he gets there. This is how it always is. His father doesn't arrive home until late at night, long after the stars in the sky are flared and glowing.

\*

Ben is sitting at the kitchen counter, writing a response about *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, when he hears a noise at the front door. The handle shakes; a fumble, from the outside. The first thing Ben thinks is, Dad must have been with Chris at the pub. The second thing he thinks is, I can't be out here.

His homework crinkles in his hand as he picks it off the counter and walks quietly back to his room, the sound of a key in the door lock echoing down the hallway. He's climbing onto his bed at the same time the front door swings open.

Heavy, messy footsteps. Chair legs skidding across the floor. The door closing, too loud.

"Benjamin?" his father calls out. His voice is gruff, wavering.

"I'm here," he replies. The polaroid camera, which had been resting in the center of his pillow, is moved by gentle fingers to the lowest drawer of his bedside dresser.

The house is silent for a moment, and then, more heavy footsteps. Refrigerator door in motion. Microwave door clicking open, microwave beeping. "What're you up to?"

"Just finishing my homework," Ben answers. His glasses slide down the bridge of his nose as he stares at his paper in his lap. He writes two sentences, and then calls out, "How was work today?"

This is always how it is. Impersonal questions, impersonal answers, three rooms apart.

"Like it always is," his father responds. He says it hollowly, distracted: that is how Ben knows his father is on the davenport, remote control in hand, a heated TV dinner on his lap. "School was good?" he asks through a mouthful of food. Ben hears the television hum to life, the distant murmurs of people talking.

"Yep," Ben answers. His father grunts in reply.

He spends his night finishing writing his paper, legs hanging from the bed's edge, spine curved over his lap. He packs away his homework, and zips up his backpack, and brushes his teeth. Then, softly, he pads on his tiptoes to the living room. The television is the only light in the room. It casts a ghostly glow that reaches each corner of the room. His father is spread out on the davenport, one ankle tucked over an armrest, TV dinner balancing unsteadily on his thigh, head fallen against the back cushion, eyes closed, jaw hanging loose. Crumpled cans are littered across the coffee table. Some collide and sound with an empty *ting* when Ben gathers them in his arms; others startle him when leftover beer liquid inside.

He places the cans in the garbage disposal; he deadbolts the front door.

When he goes to close the curtains, his fingers pause, grasping the soft thin material. The moon, round and glowing and ethereal. Edges like mist, dissolving against the night sky. Ben stares up at it. It's full, he thinks to himself, except — there, on its left side, just a sliver is missing. A slice of light: imperceptibly dull. Tomorrow night, it will be full.

Ben takes one last glance at the moon, then draws the curtains. He slowly readjusts his father on the davenport: moves him to span the length of it, head cushioned by a pillow at one end, both feet dangling over the armrest at the other. His father mumbles something once, twice, but that is all — he doesn't struggle, he doesn't wake. Ben sighs out the breath he'd been holding as he switches off the television and fumbles blindly back the hallway.

He doesn't draw the curtains on his bedroom window. The moon eases him to sleep, its nebulous edges sifting like stardust into his bedroom and settling on the soft skin of his eyelids.

\*

When Ben goes to make his breakfast the following morning, he finds the davenport empty, and his father's bedroom door closed. He can hear soft snores sneaking out from underneath the door, and relishes in the fact that he doesn't have to be so careful shutting the refrigerator door, or opening up the dishes cabinet. Breakfast is simple: eggs and toast. He eats at the kitchen countertop. Horace's polaroid camera sits beside his plate. Ben finds it nearly impossible to keep his eyes off it.

Breakfast is an easy clean-up, and afterward, he stands in the kitchen, arms hanging by his sides, pondering — he has twenty minutes before school starts, and it takes him five minutes to walk there.

He perches on the edge of the davenport, thumbing easily through his poetry anthology. The room is too dark. Ben glances up. The curtains are still closed. Sunlight is filtering through, pleadingly. Ben stands and walks to the window and slides the curtains open, and sunlight pours endlessly, and it is as though the world shifts.

\*

The schoolhouse is empty when he gets there. Not even the teacher is there. He glances around the schoolhouse grounds: wind is tussling with green tree leaves. Sunlight dripping like water through spaces between branches. Ben stoops and sits on the grass, and his head tilts against the schoolhouse, and he watches light and wind culminate into something that he wants to fill him.

\*

He doesn't see his teacher arrive, but rather senses her. He looks to one corner of the schoolhouse just as she rounds it. She's looking down at her cardigan, her hand twisting in the pocket. He watches her pull out a ring of keys, and choose one, and then glance at the schoolhouse door, and stop when she sees Ben.

She smooths down her jacket, then resumes walking toward the door. "Hello, Ben," she says, a note of surprise in her voice. "I don't usually see you here this early." She unlocks the door with a *click*, and swings it open. She glances at him sideways.

Ben shrugs and stands up. "Just excited to be here."

She raises an eyebrow. "Excited for your final exams?" she asks. "That doesn't seem like you. Or any student, really."

Ben follows her through the schoolhouse door, blinking as she flips on the light switch, then closes the door behind him.

"Though," she continues, setting her bag on her desk and unbuttoning her cardigan, "if it's exams day, that means it's the last day of school. Have any big plans for the summer?" She hangs her cardigan over the back of her desk chair and throws a smile at Ben that he doesn't see.

He is staring at the blank chalkboard.

It is as though everything freezes: Ben, in a backward mid-stumble, hands acting as feelers, fingertips finding the tabletop of a desk. The teacher, eyes in mid-motion, moving from Ben's face to where he is looking. Leaves standing still in the still wind. Warm sunlight, chilled.

Then it all unfreezes, and plays fast-forward in reverse.

Fingers clutch sweatily, frantically, one on the thick black strap, the other on metal corners of the polaroid camera. A *whoosh* as the schoolhouse door swings open, faster than seems possible. "Ben!" plays on a muted string, a progression of notes hovering on a thread that is tied from the lips of a woman to the ear of a boy — but a string cut loose by the razor-sharp blades of agony, and it floats in mid-air, almost touching an earlobe, stretching, falling short.

\*

It is not as though a record is skipping under the needle.

Rather, it is as though the needle never existed.

\*

For an interminable time, Ben runs. He does not slow; he does not even think of slowing. Light and wind whistle by him. Once enough time passes, he can no longer feel his feet, or his legs, or any stretch of skin or mass of muscle.

\*

Horace's house is the beacon that breaks the trance. Gangly legs climb the steps slowly, chest expanding and depressing too quickly to be safe. He hesitates when he reaches the door — Horace has always told him that he's there for Ben if there is an emergency. He touches the polaroid camera hanging from his neck, and isn't quite sure what constitutes as an "emergency."

Maybe he's not even home, Ben reasons. So he gently knocks on the front door.

The door cracks open, and Horace is there in the space between, in sleep-rumpled clothes, pillow wrinkles on his face. He rubs at the corners of his eyes, and blinks a few times, then his eyes focus on Ben, and his brow furrows, and he says, thickly, "...Ben? What's wrong?"

He tries to imagine how he must look: wet cheeks, windswept hair, breathless. "I just," he starts, but his throat closes up, and he chokes in a gasp.

Horace's fingers grip the doorjamb, and he takes a step out the door toward Ben. "What?" he asks, tight. "What happened?"

Ben sniffs, and looks down at the polaroid camera in his hands. A camera he never had a chance

to use. A muscle in his jawline jumps as he grits his teeth, and he fists his hands around the strap and yanks it over his head. He thrusts it toward Horace, his eyes on the porch floor. "Here," he manages. "Thanks, but..." He bites his lip. "Thanks."

Horace stares at him for a moment, then slowly reaches out and takes the camera. "Sure," he stutters, flustered, and he hooks the strap over his own neck, "but... Ben, what's—"

"It's nothing," Ben says quickly, wiping hard at his eyes and turning away from the door, toward the steps.

"Ben," Horace says, with more conviction, and Ben feels Horace's hand reach out and press against his shoulder. "Talk to me."

"I have to go," Ben says. He tugs his shoulder away from Horace's hand and stumbles down the steps. "I have to go," he says again. "I'll — I'll talk to you about it later, I just."

He runs.

\*

*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter.*