



EPTESICUS FUSCUS

Stars Come Down

Andrea Lani

Sara sits on the deck in an Adirondack chair, Rose curled like a caterpillar in her lap, and looks out over woods and fields that have been drained of color by the fading evening light. She had thought nothing could be worse than the endless darkness of a Maine winter, the nights that began in early afternoon and held on through morning. But now, with the long light of spring and the cruel trick of daylight savings, she feels that the unending days piling on top of one another cannot pass quickly enough.

Rose nestles her head into the hollow of Sarah's collarbone and works her thumb into her mouth. Sarah and Zane had talked about breaking Rose of the thumb-sucking habit before kindergarten started, and now here it is nearly the end of the school year. As far as Sarah is concerned now, Rose can go to college sucking her thumb if it makes her feel better.

"Batty," Rose mumbles around her thumb, arranging a limp piece of dark cloth over her legs. Zane had sat at Sarah's sewing machine every evening for weeks before Rose's birth, employing his seventh-grade home economics skills in turning a frayed brown towel into the beloved Batty. Rose's "security batlet," as Sarah and Zane had liked to call Batty, has grown tattered over his six years of life. Once a year, Zane had run poor Batty through the washing machine, stitched and patched his tears and worn spots, and added a new layer of wool stuffing to his belly. Batty is about due for another overhaul, but Sarah isn't sure she has the heart to take on the project.

Rose's dark eyes stare up at the sky, waiting for the first bats of the season to take wing. It is late, and Rose should have been asleep an hour ago; but she had slipped out of bed and found Sarah gazing at the

ceiling, her usual evening occupation until she gave up on sleep herself and turned to the television to block out her thoughts.

“Rose, honey, it’s late,” Sarah had said to the child standing in her doorway, faint as mist over a lake. “Can’t you sleep?”

“There’s too much light out.”

“Let’s get you back in bed,” Sarah said, rising from her own bed. “I’ll pull your curtains tighter.”

“Can we watch for bats?” Rose asked.

“Not tonight,” Sarah said, taking her daughter’s hand. “It’s after eight, and you have school in the morning.”

Rose planted her feet on the wide plank floor and pulled back against Sarah’s hand.

“Papa would take me,” she said. “Please, Mama? It’s time.”

Ignoring the voice of her mother-in-law that echoed inside her head, telling her she was spoiling the girl, letting her get away with murder now that Zane was gone, Sarah had lifted Rose into her arms and taken her out onto the deck.

The world is quiet, with no movement in the trees or near the bat houses mounted on poles around the field. Peepers sing in the bog at the bottom of the field, but even their chorus sounds subdued, compared to its deafening pitch a few weeks earlier. Rose was right, of course. Zane would have taken her out to watch for bats. And it is time. At least it would be, if there were any bats left. But the bats are disappearing, and Sarah doubts Rose will see any tonight—or any night. Zane isn’t here anymore to make sure they come back.

Zane had been obsessed with bats since he was a child and had built up a research organization to study them. But as white-nose syndrome spread north, Zane’s mission turned into a race to save the bats. Each year another hibernaculum would die off, another wave of fungus would spread to populations previously unaffected. Then, last summer, Zane had gone to northern Maine to assess potential experimental hibernation sites when his tiny pickup careened into the side of a logging truck that turned in front of him. He never had the chance to develop the cure, the vaccine he hoped would inoculate bat populations. And now another winter has gone by with more bats dying off.

As the sky darkens, the stars wink to life. Rose points to each one as it appears, and Sarah makes silent, half-hearted wishes. If she can’t wish Zane back to life, she thinks, then she should wish for a financial miracle or at least the energy to sell the house. The mortgage has

devoured her meager salary as an assistant at the public library, and she can’t handle the maintenance by herself. Over the winter, friends had helped, dropping off loads of split wood and plowing the driveway, and the neighbor had promised to mow the fields this summer; but she can’t depend on other people’s charity, their pity, forever. Yet she can’t bear the thought of putting the house on the market and finding another place to live. With her income, they would have to live in a trailer if they stay in the countryside, or an apartment hacked out of a decrepit house if they move into town. She doesn’t want to take Rose out of her home and possibly her school so soon after losing Zane.



“Is Papa up with the stars?” Rose asks.

“Part of Papa might be up there someday,” Sarah says, thinking about the speed of light, thermodynamics, and conservation of matter and energy, wishing she had paid more attention in physics, wishing Zane was there to explain. He’d had tireless patience for answering Rose’s questions, even at the stage where every sentence she uttered began with “why.” He always gave her thorough, scientific explanations, even offering competing hypotheses. “Why that rock?” Rose would ask, and Zane would launch into an account of glaciers, the uplifting of mountain ranges, the movement of tectonic plates, the formation of the earth, the Big Bang.

Sarah, who had read every child-rearing book her library stocked, admonished him, “It’s too much information. You’re going to confuse her.”

It would be easier, she thought, just to say, “Because God put it there.” She was sure three-year-old curiosity had led to the invention of the first deity. Anything to stem the tide of questions. Sarah didn’t resort to religious explanations, but Zane teased her when she launched into magical speculation, based on whatever fairytales she and Rose were reading at the time.

“Maybe a troll lives under that rock,” she would say, and Zane would smile and spin them both into his arms.

“Isn’t the world magical enough, without making stuff up about it?” he would ask, and Sarah could feel his joy running over her own skin. It made her forgive him, almost, for making fun of her spiritual beliefs.

“What does that even mean, you’re ‘spiritual but not religious’?” he had once asked.

“That I believe in something bigger than myself,” she tried to explain.

“Well, of course, there are lots of things bigger than you,” he said. “That tree, this mountain, rivers, oceans, the earth. But you don’t need to believe in those things. You can see them with your own eyes.”

“I mean a greater power,” Sarah responded, frustrated he wasn’t taking her seriously.

“Like gravity? Solar radiation? The power of water to wear away rocks? The orbit of the planets?”

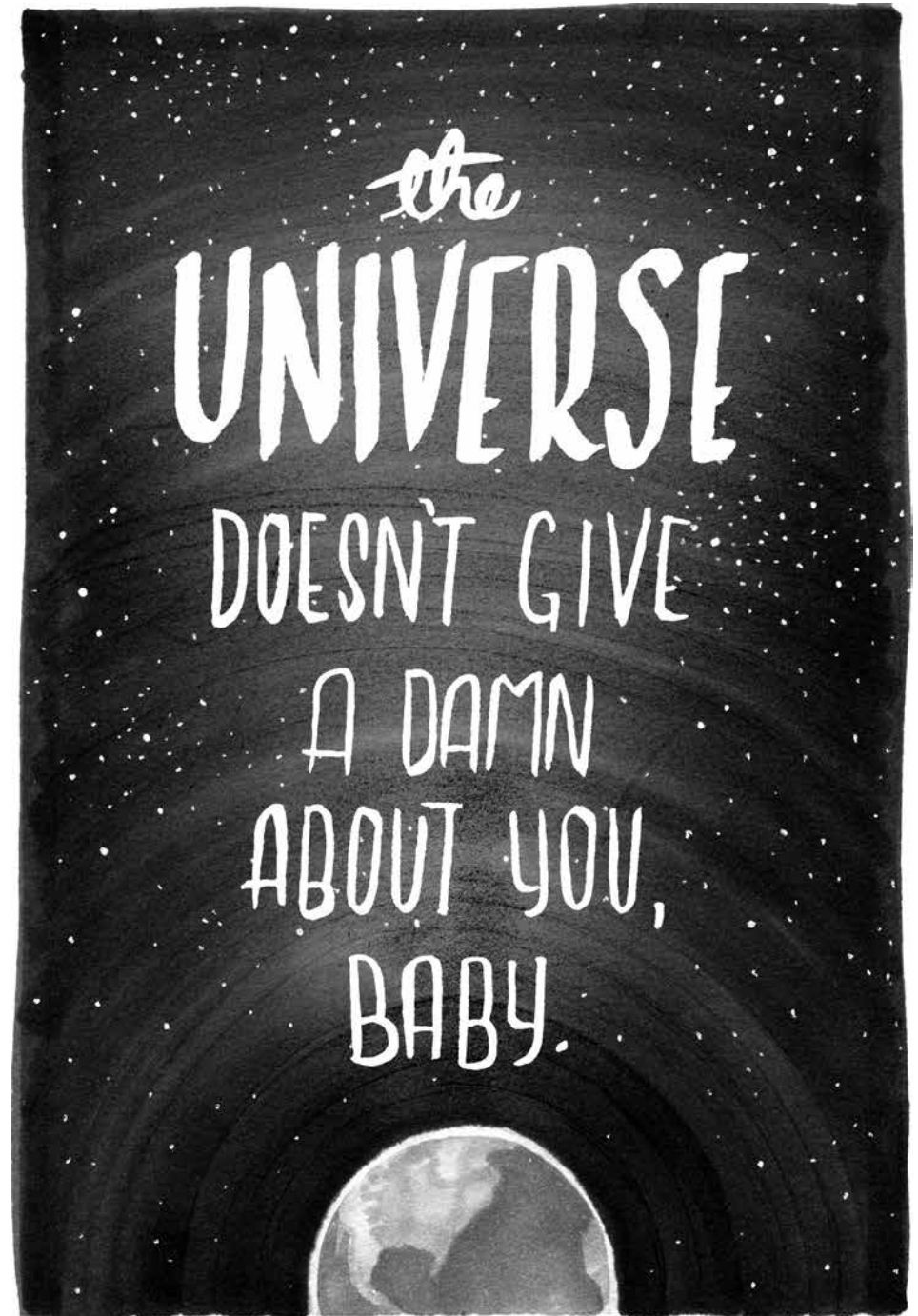
She had struggled to explain what she meant. Not God, exactly. Not a man on a throne with a beard and white robe but an energy, a beneficence in the world. But if she used that word, “beneficence,” Zane would remind her of children killed by a bomb, a village flattened by a tsunami, an outbreak of cholera, whatever terrible tragedy had struck the world that week.

“The universe doesn’t give a damn about you, baby,” he would say.

She had always thought his attitude was arrogant. How could he be so sure? And why couldn’t he have his beliefs, or non-beliefs, and leave her to hers? Then he died, and she saw he was right. The universe didn’t give a damn about her, or Zane, or Rose.

In the days after his death, numb with shock and moving as if suspended in Jello, she had agreed to her in-laws’ offer to handle Zane’s funeral arrangements. They held the service in their church, complete with gospel, psalms, and hymns. Sarah had sat in the front pew with Rose on her lap, wishing for an old-fashioned black veil to hide her shame at having betrayed Zane’s most passionate convictions.

After the service, Sarah stood in a corner of the church rectory, as Zane’s distant aunts and cousins came up to her, their paper plates heaped with finger-rolls, coleslaw, and cheap cookies, and told her, “He is with God,” or, “He’s moved on to a better place.” Zane’s parents stood nearby, his mother dabbing her eyes with a wadded Kleenex. They smiled and thanked the well-wishers. Sarah shook with anger. She hated these people, with their simplistic, childish beliefs, who had named their son after a writer of third-rate westerns. You didn’t know him at all! she railed in her mind. They did not know *her* Zane, who, when he climbed to the top of a mountain or picked up a tiny green beetle, would say, “Why would anyone want to believe in the afterlife when real life is so incredible?”





“Grandma says he’s up there,” Rose says.

Of course her mother-in-law would tell Rose Zane was in heaven, even if she had always told her heathen son he was going to go to hell for leaving the church. Sarah wishes Zane were here now, to explain to Rose about decomposition and the nutrient cycle. They would probably end up singing, “The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out, the worms play pinochle on your snout.”

“Right now Papa’s becoming part of the plants and animals that live on Mount Battie,” Sarah says.

It had been Rose’s idea to spread Zane’s ashes on a mountain in the Camden Hills that the three of them had hiked the previous summer, just weeks before the accident. Rose had thought the mountain was named after her stuffed bat, and Sarah couldn’t think of a better plan. She and Zane had never discussed what they wanted to happen to their remains, not expecting death to come so soon.

“Mostly, though, he lives on in the people he loved, like you and me,” Sarah says and then adds, grudgingly, “and Grandma and Grandpa.”

“And the bats, too?” Rose asks. “He loved the bats, didn’t he?”

“And the bats,” Sarah says, her voice a cracked whisper. Zane had loved the bats. He loved them as the rebels of the mammal world, the only furred creatures to have cracked the code of flying that otherwise belonged only to the realm of insects and birds and a few prehistoric reptiles. He loved them even though—or maybe because—most people feared and reviled them. Zane had lived for the bats, and died trying to save them.

Sarah buries her nose in the top of Rose’s head. Her hair smells like sand and dust and something sweet. How do you tell a six-year-old that an entire family of animals is going extinct before her eyes? Sarah has already had to tell her daughter the worst thing imaginable. She cannot bring herself to add another burden to the girl’s tiny heart.

“Mama?” Rose whispers. Her voice rises in excitement, “Mama, look. Look out there!”

Sarah lifts her face from the girl’s head, blinking the tears out of her eyes. It can’t be bats. Even if they’re out there, it’s too dark now to see them. Rose leaps off her lap and runs across the deck, and Sarah follows behind, looking out over the field. Tiny lights wink against the blackness. Fireflies. They always come out at the time of year when the days last the longest. Rose has never been awake late enough to see them before.

Rose runs down the stairs and out into the field.

“It’s the stars come down, Mama,” Rose shrieks. “The stars came down to get Papa.”

Sarah wonders what Zane would say about that. Would he get a mason jar from the kitchen, catch a firefly, and take it inside for Rose to examine in the light? Would seeing the insect’s unremarkable black body drain the magic away from the twinkling stars in their backyard, or would Rose, like Zane, find the truth the most magical thing of all?

But Zane isn’t here now, with his jar and his scientific explanations. He has left behind Sarah with Rose and a yard full of fireflies. Sarah leans on the railing and watches her daughter chase stars, her white nightgown a pale wisp flying across the dark grass, Batty’s terry cloth wings flapping behind her.

